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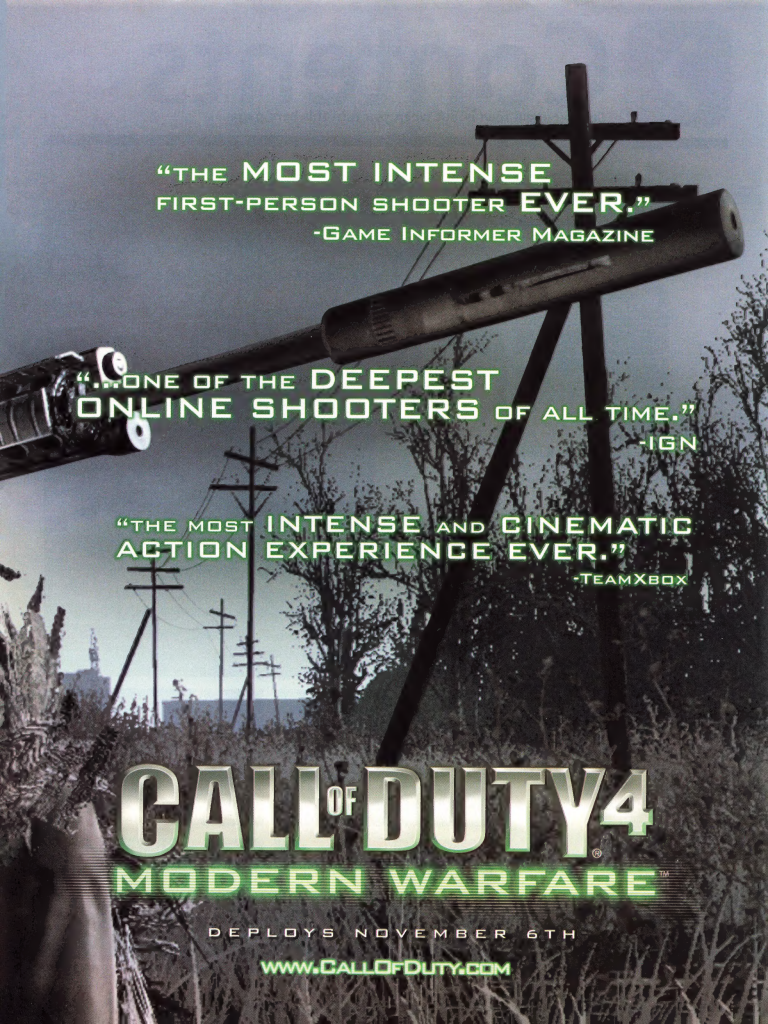
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THE WITCHER

— ROLE-PLAYING GAME —

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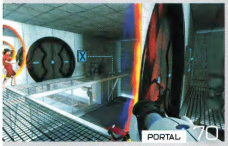

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THIS MONTH ON GFW12.1UP.COM

Go deeper inside Gearbox online with more *Borderlands*, more *Brothers in Arms*, and more Randy Pitchford. Also, bonus precious *The Lord of the Rings Online: Book 11* details to obsess over.

1UP NETWORK

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COVER ME

Gearbox vs. Gearbox: And the winner is...?

You may wonder how we come up with our cover images. I wonder, too, sometimes. Especially when we have one week left to go and still don't have anything yet. The thing is, though it may seem like a simple matter to you (just put a hot chick on the cover!), we have many factors to take into account and many masters to please.

Take this month, for example. We knew from the start exactly what our cover story was going to be. It was to be (and still is) a profile of Gearbox Software, the maverick game developers out of Dallas, Texas, who have brought us, among other things, the *Half-Life: Opposing Force* and *Blue Shift* expansions, and the outstanding *Brothers in Arms* series. Gearbox is now working on two games at once: *Brothers in Arms: Hell's Highway* (the latest game in the series), and *Borderlands*, a brand-new action-RPG that (they say) will merge elements of the *Mad Max* movies and *Diablo*.

Awesome, right? The problem is: Which game do we feature on the cover? Because we know from doing this every month that we need a "strong central image." That means focusing on *one* game. So, then, which one do we pick? *Brothers in Arms: Hells Highway*, because it is the more familiar of the two? The series has tons of fans, so it could be the safer bet. On the other hand, there have been tons of previews of this game out there already. So it may not be "scoopy" enough to excite fans of the series who know a lot already. Further, we've had a lot of soldiers on our covers of late. Do we really want another? Do our readers? With *Borderlands*, the problem is different. First, have enough people heard of the game yet? Will it mean anything to folks who see it on the newsstand? It's always a gamble to put a new property on a cover. Do we want to take this chance? Do we believe in the game enough? And if we do, what image do we use that will attract readers and help them "get" the game?

Limited space here prevents me from really giving you all the considerations here (for example: Maybe we feature *neither* game...), but, in the end, we decided to break with tradition and feature both games at once. Though, honestly, as I write this, we still haven't entirely figured out how we're doing that. I hope it turned out OK! Did it? Did we make the right call? Do you think my job is easy? What would you have done? Oh...and enjoy the issue!

Jeff Green
Editor-in-Chief
Games for Windows: The Official Magazine

Now Playing: *Team Fortress 2, Neverwinter Nights 2: Mask of the Betrayer, Company of Heroes*
1UP.com Blog: GFWJeff.1UP.com

MEET THE STAFF

SEAN MOLLOY
MANAGING EDITOR

As a Medic in *Team Fortress 2*, al Sean asks is that you don't stand in a corner shooting a wall for the entire duration of your ubercharge. Is that really so difficult?

Now Playing: *Team Fortress 2, WOW, Grow Island*
1UP.com Blog: GFWSean.1UP.com

DARREN GLADSTONE
SENIOR EDITOR (FEATURES/TECH)

As the magazine's chief tinkerer, of course Darren's the Engineer. Problem is, he spends all his time trying to overclock the sentry turret.

Now Playing: *Team Fortress 2, Stranglehold, Heligate: London, Jericho*
1UP.com Blog: GFWDarren.1UP.com

RYAN SCOTT
EDITOR (REVIEWS/EXTEND)

As a Tauren Hunter, Ryan dares you to cap a flag without tripping one of his awesome frost traps. Wait, what game are we talking about again?

Now Playing: *Team Fortress 2* (for real), *World of WarCraft*
1UP.com Blog: GFWRyan.1UP.com

SHAWN ELLIOTT
EDITOR (STAT)

As Spy, Soldier, Demo, Sniper, and Pyro, Shawn just plays too much *Team Fortress 2*, period.

Now Playing: *Team Fortress 2, Company of Heroes: Opposing Fronts, Enemy Territory: Quake Wars*
1UP.com Blog: GFWShawn.1UP.com

MICHAEL JENNINGS
ART DIRECTOR

As a chess player of life, Michael just moved his rook to F8. Oh, snap!

Now Playing: Let's make a magazine!
1UP.com Blog: GFWMichael.1UP.com

ROSEMARY PINKHAM
JUNIOR DESIGNER

As a designer, Rosie laid out Player vs. Player this month and still doesn't know what the hell she was looking at.

Now Playing: Her DS
1UP.com Blog: GFWRosie.1UP.com

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Letters

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LETTER OF THE MONTH

DELLTERNATIVES

I thoroughly enjoyed Alice Liang's "This Old PC" article (*GFW* #10, pg. 94). You all should let her write more. Anyway, the sidebar "Dell Builds It for You" states that you can get a similar build from Dell but will pay more. It then says at the end: "Being lazy has its price." This is not entirely true.

[If] you go to Dell, you pay for a name and proprietary parts in a lot of cases. I only recommend Dell to folks like my parents. I've been building my own PCs since the early '90s—that is, until I realized I could have someone else build it for me for around the same price, *plus* get a warranty and tech support.

So after reading the article, I went online to CyberPower and tried to see if I could match her do-it-yourself shopping list...and came up with $1,503.00 (before all applicable rebates). Just wanted to point out that you can be lazy without it costing you. I still will upgrade hardware to extend a PC's life, but for building from the ground up, it's far better to have someone else build it for you nowadays.

Brian Cobb

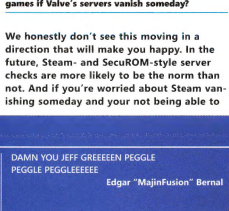
Hmmm.... OK, we're going to give you the benefit of the doubt and assume that you're not a viral CyberPower shill. And yes, you're right. Maybe we should've put an asterisk next to that "Being lazy has its price" comment—obviously, you can snag a build-to-order machine from CyberPower, Velocity Micro, iBuyPower, or Shecky'sComputerShack.com™ for less. Your mileage with a build-to-order company varies depending upon everything from sales deals and parts used to moon phases to whoever finally decides to pick up the phone in customer support.

AUTHENTICATING

I have two basic requirements for games. They must run right out of the box and be playable even if the support services are no longer available. I think these requirements are fair. When considering that most books, movie DVDs, and music CDs meet these requirements and cost $20 or less, I feel I am entitled to expect them from a $50 videogame. This is especially true when that videogame requires a computer that costs over $1,000. Imagine my displeasure when I found out about the activation requirements for *BioShock*.

From my point of view, all activation does is promote and justify piracy. It's all but guaranteed that when these activation servers are shut down for good, someone will pop up on a forum asking how to get by the activation so they can play again...and the only people with that answer will be hackers and pirates. I don't like the idea of having to do something illegal to get a game I bought legally to run.

Joe



• What happens to all your purchased Steam games if Valve's servers vanish someday?

We honestly don't see this moving in a direction that will make you happy. In the future, Steam- and SecuROM-style server checks are more likely to be the norm than not. And if you're worried about Steam vanishing someday and your not being able to play your purchased games anymore, that's obviously a valid concern...but in our eyes, physical media is just as volatile as some company's servers. We can't play our 8-track tapes anymore, either. We just had to rebuy *Like a Virgin* on CD the other day. Our 5-1/4" floppy diskettes of *Zak McKracken and the Alien Mindbenders* are pretty dang useless, too, and may very well have dissolved by now.

THE CASE OF THE DISAPPEARING DOCTOR

It was stated in your interview with *StarCraft II* lead designer Dustin Browder and lead producer Chris Sigaty (*GFW* #10, pg. 29) that the beloved Terran Medic will not be making an appearance in *StarCraft II*. I find this somewhat contradictory, as the Medic can be seen in the Technology Console section of the Campaign demonstration at BlizzCon '07, as well as in one of the Thor demonstration videos on the *StarCraft II* website, among other places. So who's right?

Justin Chee

• She's there. Then she's gone again. Wait...she's back! Oh no—she's not.

While we certainly said in our article that units like the Firebat and Medic were gone, we also said that "any of these may still return, vanish, and return again in some mutant form." Blizzard's made it a point all along to say *SC2* is very much a work in progress. We wrote that article less than a month before BlizzCon, so that should tell you how quickly things can change in *SC2*'s development. Our article was an anachronistic snapshot. BlizzCon was a snapshot, too, and we'd be *shocked* if the Terrans we saw there are the same Terrans we'll get in the final game.

Write us at GFWLetters@ziffdavis.com. •

MAIL BYTES

I read the article "No Fair" [*GFW* #10, pg. 24]. Wow! A real piece of journalism. How refreshing.

Scott B. Rose

DAMN YOU JEFF GREEEEEN PEGGLE
PEGGLE PEGGLEEEEEE

Edgar "MajinFusion" Bernal

With all the peripherals out there for PC games, where is the [Wii] Nunchuk-like controller? I think the WASD keyboard layout is a pain. I'd like to be able to control my movement (especially in a shooter) with a thumbstick and aim/shoot with a mouse.

Christopher S.

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THE LORD OF THE RINGS ONLINE BOOK 11: DEFENDERS OF ERIADOR

Balrogs and general contractors come to Middle-earth (or Balrogs and Ballyhoo)

PUBLISHER: **Midway** DEVELOPER: **Turbine** GENRE: **MMORPG** RELEASE DATE: **Winter 2007**

HANDS-ON PREVIEW

Beneath a broken stone seal in the north of Angmar lies the Rift. A jagged crack leads deeper and deeper into the earth, the walls glassy, wet, and ancient. Seeking to still the rumbling war machine of the Witch-king, my unlikely band of six has delved under the seal for hours. We've made our way through hordes of Fire-Orcs—the *Ghashfra*—their veins glowing lava-red.

"Ooooh, look—epic boots. Random drop!" cries DangerDan, our Dwarf Guardian. He's been the point of the spear as our party plunges further below in pursuit of our quarry, the Balrog.

Eldrad, our Elven Hunter, cries foul. "Hey, that's medium armor."

"It's not for me. It's for somebody else," explains DangerDan. "Aww, come on...."

You shall not pass without looking at this Balrog reveal that Turbine showed off last March.

DIGGING DEEP

The dispute between Eldrad and DangerDan would normally be unremarkable, expect this exchange was between Dan Parke and Michael Jablonn, systems engineer and producer for Turbine's *The Lord of the Rings Online*. Along with creative director Cardell Kerr, executive producer Jeffrey Steefel, and a few other Turbine staffers, I've spent the past few hours on an express tour of the showpiece raid in *Defenders of Eriador*, the third free content expansion for *LOTRO*. They may be playing with admin characters on a private server, but they still take their raid drops seriously.

The Rift, as this 12-man raid is unassumingly named, is the second raid instance introduced in *LOTRO*; the first was the 24-man Battle for Helegrod released in *Book 9: Shores of Evendim*. "Helegrod is viewed by many people as a very simple raid experience," says Jablonn. "So we spent more time focusing on encounters, reducing what some call 'trash mobs.'" From my early look, the encounters generally deliver, from early tussles with Fire-Orcs to the final smackdown with an angry Balrog.

"We tried to make it more dynamic," says Jablonn. "Our goal is that nobody stands around hitting buttons." Three times the size of Helegrod, the Rift's designed for parties half the size of its predecessor. But despite its size, straightforward fights seem few and far between. During my brief foray, we're forced to split the party, run escort missions, and deal with combined ground and airborne assaults by drakes. Creatures morph midbattle as they are infected by Cthulu-like unnamed creatures from below. Minibosses change their skills and tactics based on which of their friends you've already defeated, and which remain in the fight. None of this is radically innovative. But by replacing some of the random smashing of Orcs with more tactical challenges (like dealing with carpet-bombing drakes), the Rift may avoid some of the grind that often drags raids down.

While in the Rift, a decided not-in-Kansas-anymore feeling permeates not just the encounters, but the environment as well. The contrast between the surface and the depths is designed to build over time, but when experienced in fast-forward, it's quite startling. "When you get into these types of places—deep >

Sensing a void in the genre, Turbine has added more fights with spiders.

Battling it out in the Rift, *LOTRO*'s new 12-person raid instance.

under the earth—there's always going to be the sense that you have unleashed things from below...dug too deep," says Steefel. "It's a pretty big theme in the lore."

A HOLE CALLED HOME

But there are other kinds of digging in *Book 11: Defenders of Eriador*: Hobbit holes and foundations. Each race (Elves, Dwarves, Hobbits, and Men) gets an infinite stack of instanced neighborhoods, each accessed through a gateway near their archetypal homelands (Duillond, Thorin's Hall, Michel Delving, and Bree respectively). Each has 30 houses, from tiny shacks for low-level players to halls for kinships.

Turbine's attention to detail shows in the neighborhood templates. Each house is unique, set into sprawling neighborhoods filled with set pieces: waterfalls, party trees, and gathering places. But initially, there won't be all that much to *do* in your neighborhood except store your stuff, decorate, and have a party.

"It is always easier to add than to subtract," admits Steefel. "This is really the beginning of the neighborhood experience." The plan is to have *The Lord of the Rings Online*'s neighborhoods become the focus of stories and events. "If everyone in the neighborhood had their house decorated, you could trigger a fair," he suggests. "Or a number of people have a certain kind of object in their yard, and that triggers access to a special building."

But for now, these remain just big ideas. Luckily, housing won't be expensive—it's designed to be accessible to small kinships and characters as low as level 15. >

BOOH IT'S CLASS LOVIN'

Part of every periodic release for Turbine is an intentional rework of two classes. This time around, Minstrels and Lore-masters (healer and crowd control for the uninitiated) get the nod.

BEWARE THE MIGHTY MINSTREL

The news for Minstrels is especially good. Already one of the only major MMO healing classes with serious solo chops, these lute-wielding morale-boosters get a whole new line of skills called "Words of War," which, as the name suggests, kick butt in direct combat. New skills and tweaks to the Minstrel's healing and buff abilities add to its flexibility in groups, helping ensure that Minstrels don't *have* to be healbots.

PITY THE LORE-MASTER'S FROG

The Lore-master, ever at odds with Tolkien's world being light on magic, gets some subtle tweaks to debuff skills and crowd control along with one particularly cool (and pretty) combat attack: Lightning Storm. *LOTRO* sessions are often rich in story, and nothing ends a tall-tale fight against a minion of Sauron like a lightning bolt to the head.

More interesting from a tactical perspective is the addition of the Lynx to the Lore-master's stable of pets. The Lore-master's been criticized since launch for its limited and somewhat bland pet options, but the Lynx, which attacks from stealth and gets benefits for flanking, brings real tactical advantages to group combat. But the really exciting news is that Lore-masters can also run around town with bunny rabbits and toads in tow. The pets don't do anything, but then again, neither does the endless stable of small pets in *World of WarCraft*.

THE INVASION HAS BEGUN

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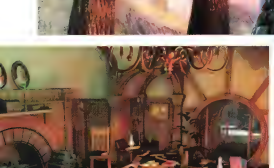

● "Am I the only one who finds the troll's cowbell playing distracting?"

NEEDS MORE COWBELL

When *LOTRO* launched last summer, it included a music system. It wasn't much, just something the devs thought was fun in beta and stable enough to ship. "It was something that our audio team was fooling around with," says executive producer Jeffrey Steefel.

But the music ended up being a huge hit—before the game even left beta, hundreds of videos were up on YouTube. The popularity took Turbine by surprise. On any given evening, jam sessions were popping up on nearly every server. "So we decided that music was definitely one of the things we were going to work on for our first update," says Steefel.

That first update, *Book 9: Shores of Evendim*, added chords, bass and percussion, and most importantly, local sync, so that you could play perfect rhythm on your own PC, and then have the notes stream to the audience. It might sound pointless, but you probably haven't sat in The Prancing Pony in Bree while a band plays "Nights in White Satin." We dare you not to get chills.

Book 11: Defenders of Eriador adds a few refinements. The Minstrel can now teach someone to play an instrument they otherwise couldn't play. This is important because, you know, what if your Minstrel drummer is puking in the van and you need to get that Elf Hunter up to speed in a hurry? But the really exciting news is the addition of the cowbell and bagpipes. Yes, cowbell. How long before the main stage band at the Hobbiton Party Tree is laying down Blue Oyster Cult's "(Don't Fear) the Reaper"?

"When we add tambourine, we'll start getting Fleetwood Mac," jokes Steefel. Turbine is committed to giving players what they want. And if they've got a fever for more cowbell, they're going to get more cowbell.

WHAT HAVE I GOTS IN MY POCKETSES?

The headliners in *Book 11: Defenders of Eriador* are the Rift and housing. But they actually represent a fairly small part of the overall new content, which includes two new regions, about 100 new quest lines, and revamps the Minstrel and Loremaster classes. Like proud children, Steefel and his team won't let me leave without showing off their favorite new toy. Walking the banks of a river in the Trollshaws, we bump into Gollum, quietly hunting for his supper in the weeds. After seeing us, he lopes off into the distance. The encounter is perfectly structured, perfectly rendered. Even though I knew it was coming, a little tuning fork goes off in my nerd-heart.

"Let's go to the lake," says Steefel.

The lake, it turns out, is *the* lake, where Gollum and Bilbo engage in the riddle contest that kicks off the *The Lord of the Rings*. Like many signature locations in this virtual Middle-earth, it's clear that someone at Turbine built the area out of true love for the story. What geek wouldn't do an embarrassing happy-dance in their cubicle after learning that their "job" for the month is laying out the polygons for Riddlemere?

"Where's the boat?" I ask.

Nobody speaks.

"You know, the boat. The one Gollum uses to sneak up on Bilbo."

Kerr, who clearly loves this world, finally pipes up. "Umm.... It has decayed over the years? The Goblins aren't exactly responsible, so my guess is one of them stole it and took it for a joyride?"

The room's full of chuckles. This area is, after all, in beta.

"So in other words, you forgot the freakin' boat?"

Thankfully, they laugh. But Steefel's PR radar lights up. "Oh, no. I can see the headline—'Turbine Missed the Boat!'"

But they didn't. While the beta for *Book 11: Defenders of Eriador* might be missing a minor detail like Gollum's decrepit skiff on the shore of Riddlemere, Turbine is delivering on the promises they've made to their players: a little something for everyone, with a Balrog to boot.

● **Julian Murdoch**

XTRAS

For more on *LOTRO*, visit GFW12.1UP.com, where you'll get second breakfast, elevenses, and more Hobbity good times.

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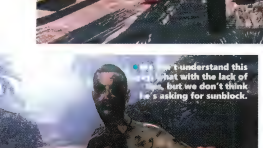

• We don't understand this [illegible] what with the lack of [illegible], but we don't think he's asking for sunblock.

• Hey, honey—check out this vacation brochure. The place is called Dead Island. Sounds fun, huh?

DEAD ISLAND

Hey, Gilligan, pass the leg bone!

PUBLISHER: **T&D** DEVELOPER: **Techland** GENRE: **Survival-Horror** RELEASE DATE: **2008**

PREVIEW

One of the great mysteries of modern times—or even of all time—is why there hasn't been a good zombie game for the PC. PC gamers like flesh-eating undead creatures as much as console gamers. Some of us eat human flesh ourselves. And yet the best zombie game in years, Capcom's *Dead Rising*, still hasn't been ported from the Xbox 360. Techland, the Poland-based developers of last year's well-received *Call of Juarez*, have heard our plaintive cries and are now working on *Dead Island*, a survival-horror game that sounds like an unholy mashup of *Dead Rising*, *Grand Theft Auto*, *Lost*, and *Fantasy Island*. We were intrigued enough to ask Techland product manager Marcin Ploro a few dumb questions.

GFW: For a frame of reference, can players of games like *Dead Rising* or *Resident Evil 4* expect something similar here?

MARCIN PIORO: No doubt about it. These two are great zombie games. I'm sure that it comes [from] our fascination [with] zombie movies like *Dawn of the Dead*. We are inspired by the same movies, and players will find similarities in our game.

GFW: So are these old-school slow zombies, like in the George Romero movies, or fast zombies as in *28 Days Later*?

MP: There will be a few different kinds of zombies. I'm sure that both Romero fans and *28 Days Later* fans will be pleased.

GFW: Mostly, we just want to kill them. Your press release mentions an "innovative system of targeting." How is it innovative?

MP: It's all about the damage system, which is the main dish in *Dead Island*. Inflicted injuries are varied and depend on what weapon you use and the part of the body you hit. If you fight with a machete, you can cut a zombie's head off. If you fight with a club, after a hit, you will see true deformation of the zombie's body. Visualization of injuries is very realistic thanks to the multilayer body model, which shows skin, muscles, and bones. For example, you can shoot off zombies' legs and watch them crawl. This feature will expand the survival-horror genre to a totally new level of realism.

GFW: So tell us about the story. You and your wife crash-land on a tropical island. We know that much—plus that there are zombies. The screens show a resort-type setting. Why is there a resort on a zombie island? That seems like a bad idea.

MP: The island is a big tropical tourist resort. You can find hotels, marinas, and pool bars there. There are a few small villages and a town. The island is inhabited by natives as well as tourists. They are survivors fighting with zombies and trying to get off the island just like you. There are a few other groups living there, but their goals and motives are unknown in the beginning. Zombies are not the only threat on the island.

GFW: You're touting the game as "nonlinear," but what does this mean here? Is it similar to *Grand Theft Auto* in that you can wander freely but then do "missions" to advance the plot? How much freedom is there?

MP: You will have a lot of choices to make, different tasks to accept, and some of them will help or harm you. Every action has a consequence. For example, there are factions on the island that fight with each other. They fight for food, water, and other things. If you help them, other groups will be hostile to you. You can decide to help one of them to get something extra. It might be a weapon or some vehicle. Or you can just go around sightseeing and killing zombies.

GFW: We'd rather kill zombies. • Jeff Green

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BLACK PROPHECY

Another stab at massively multiplayer sci-fi

PUBLISHER: 10tacle Studios DEVELOPER: Reakktor Media GENRE: MMORPG RELEASE DATE: 2008

PREVIEW

Sci-fi MMOs usually don't fly very high—one need only look to *Star Wars Galaxies* or *Auto Assault* for ample proof. But that doesn't faze German developer Reakktor Media (the abysmal *Neocron 1* and *2*), whose upcoming space-action game *Black Prophecy* brazenly defies the unspoken rule that all MMOs must include swords and sorcery. Though the game's still shrouded in secrecy, project manager Simon Bachmann gave us a very quick peek at what's to come, explaining his belief that "The sci-fi genre is starting to become an integral part of the MMO gaming experience—and having less competition and a scenario that allows for innovation also helps us stand out from the crowd."

Perhaps so, especially in Europe—where convention-challenging games like *Eve Online* enjoy considerably more success than they do in the States. But contrary to *Eve*'s political and economic focus, *Black Prophecy*'s positioned as an action-MMO. Bachmann defines this as "a game with direct controls, as opposed to point-and-click gameplay. But it also means avoiding frustrating gameplay elements that get between the players and the action, like endless travel time."

Translation: When you shoot stuff, twitch talent matters just as much as your character sheet. Your in-game avatar's progression is measured in skills, not levels (think *Ultima Online* or the aforementioned *Eve*)...and you can (surprise!) custom-fit your spaceship's weapons and other equipment to suit your play style. Just don't expect big numbers to pop up over a space pirate's head simply because you hit the "1" key—as with any shooter or RTS (less so with most MMOs), your personal finesse largely defines success or failure. And with *Black Prophecy*'s promised 300-man battles—ranging from team-based PVE to deathmatch and capture-the-flag PVP modes—you don't want to be the guy who sucks at games and loses everything for everybody, do you? Of course you don't. • **Ryan Scott**

• In the future, some humans decide that they want to be robots and some decide that they want to be more kick-ass humans (read: cybernetic and biological enhancement). They fight. Presto—a plot!

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Another stab at massively multiplayer sci-fi

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AND IT IS ANGRY.
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2K Boston's Ken Levine: under the water, on cloud nine.

LIFE AFTER RAPTURE

***BioShock* creator Ken Levine looks back at his invention**

BY SHAWN ELLIOTT AND SEAN MOLLOY

INTERVIEW

SPOILER WARNING
The following interview contains plot spoilers for *BioShock*, including a frank discussion of the game's ending. Continue reading at your own risk.

GFW: You've gotta be on cloud nine right now. After *BioShock* launched, did Warren Spector, Harvey Smith, or any of the guys associated with the *Deus Ex*, *System Shock*, and *Thief* school of design phone you to comment?

KEN LEVINE: I got tons of calls from colleagues in the industry, really nice things from Cliffy [Bleszinksi], Chris Taylor, and Gabe [Newell]—people I hugely respect said some very kind words. I didn't specifically hear from Harvey and Warren, but I'd be curious to know what they thought, and I'm looking forward to what those guys are up to.... It's great that the industry is at a point where it's not like, say, Hollywood, where people are constantly looking over their shoulder at the Joneses and terrified of what they're doing. We play each other's games and love each other's games and learn from each other's games. I don't think there's a single great game designer out there, especially on the PC side, that I haven't learned from and incorporated those lessons into *BioShock*.

GFW: What are some of the more important lessons you've learned from other games that benefited *BioShock*?

KL: Well, certainly from Valve's games I learned a huge amount about telling a story in an FPS. How to do it through the world rather than through words. I learned from everybody back in my Looking Glass days, who worked on all the original *System Shock* games and *[Ultima] Underworld* games, the rudiments of how to make a world simulation interesting. I learned from my colleagues at Rockstar how to make something feel that you're not being driven along on a string, the kind of range of choices you can start to present to players. Certainly I don't think *BioShock* is nearly as open-ended as *GTA*, but we certainly took a lot of cues from those guys, thinking about how you can have the player drive events, rather than the designer. We took some from our friends in Japan. Certainly if you got through the ice door in Medical with Incinerate, you saw the *Zelda* influence there—using very simple, primal knowledge that people have about how the world works.

GFW: It's interesting that you bring up the notion of choice, because obviously a huge theme through the whole game is the idea that you don't really *have* a choice. Yeah, you can pick what plasmids you have, you might pick which path you're going down, but really, Ken Levine or whoever's designing the game is the one ultimately telling you where you're going and what you're doing.

KL: When you go see a movie, does it have an emotional impact on you? Clearly, yes. You see a romantic comedy or something, and you look over to your wife, and you see tears running down her cheek...how does that differ from the tear on her cheek when you bring her flowers on her birthday? I don't know. Are the choices you have in games as valid as the choices you have in life? No, because the choices you have in life are infinite, and your choices in games are always a subset. With *BioShock*, I wanted—in a postmodern sense—to comment on that. But I think all entertainment and all media experiences are, in a sense, an illusion of freedom, an illusion of emotion, rather than the actual thing. But does that make it any less valid? I don't know.

GFW: So you have the big twist with Fontaine and "Would you kindly?" Is it a further design or narrative decision to have that lack of agency, that lack of choice, continue? We're thinking specifically of when Tenenbaum instructs you to become the Big Daddy. You're suspicious already because you'd been played several times by several different characters, so when she's telling you to drill a hole in your throat, you're thinking, uh, maybe I don't *want* to do that. But you *still* don't really have a choice.

KL: Games are funnels, right? Some may be wider funnels, but they're funnels. *BioShock*, and every videogame, teases you with freedom and then kicks you a little bit with the lack of freedom. I think maybe we're a little more honest about it, making the player think about it a little more. Because what's more important about the future of games than freedom? I don't think better graphics are really the future of games; I don't think it's about better physics. I think the future of games is about more freedom. Although I think there is a huge amount of freedom in *BioShock*, especially in the combat space, all along the way. I always want to focus on the freedom in the spaces that *are* actually totally open and free, like the combat space, as compared to the story space.

GFW: In *BioShock*, the choice, outside of tactical choice, is to harvest Little Sisters or not to harvest. I [Shawn] had an awkward experience because the ending options in *BioShock* are binary—good ending or bad ending. I harvested early on, and then after the plot twist, I *stopped* harvesting and decided to exercise the one ethical choice that I had, and I saved all the Little Sisters from that point on. So it seemed like a very weird disconnect between my actions and the feedback the game was giving me, especially the abrupt "bad" ending....

KL: You were frustrated that there was no chance to redeem yourself. I think that's a valid criticism. Games are big and complicated things, and I wish I was smart enough to think of everything. It's something I'll certainly be thinking about for the future: What are the permutations along that path, and how do we feed back a player's moral trajectory through the game? Maybe we can go into a totally analog space with this somehow. That's what I want to think about, not just, "can I pump it from two endings to four endings?", but how do I make it analog rather than digital.... I've just gotta figure out how. [*Laughs*]

Originally, I never conceived more than one ending. My colleague at 2K, Greg Gobbi, said we should do multiple endings. I think that was the right choice, but it shows you how I think about things. Those endings came fairly late, and I wrote them fairly late, and we built them fairly late. We used an outsourcing house to make those videos. I had initially conceived one ending—and finding a way that would sum up the whole experience in a meaningful way. Not that I had actually written a damn thing, which was probably part of Greg's concern.

GFW: One downside to *BioShock*'s tape recorder narrative device is that character development is in the past tense. But it seems like the biggest impediment [to character development], outside of some of the little things Valve has been doing with Alyx in its *Half-Life* series, is A.I., right?

KL: Absolutely. I'm thinking about that kind of stuff for the future. But in my work and my team's work, if we don't think we can do something well, we just don't go there. If we don't think we can do an open city well, we're just not going to go there. That's why *BioShock*'s set at the bottom of the ocean—we wanted to make Rapture really feel complete, as much as we can. If we don't think we can do video diaries well, we're not going to go there. We're just going to do the best possible audio diaries and really try to blow people away with it. I'd rather go to the best little sandwich shop than a really mediocre gourmet restaurant. I think even if you look at something like Alyx...at the end of the day, she breaks in her own way. She breaks a little bit because she doesn't get hurt; she doesn't react to everything; you can't talk to her; you can't initiate real dialogue with her; you can't speak. But I think the work Valve did with her facial reactions and things like that, certainly the quality of the writing and the quality of the art and animation goes a long way to making that character go past that suspension of disbelief. She's the best of breed in a young field.

GFW: Let's go back for a second to endings. This thing has shipped 1.5 million copies; 2K Games says that this is now a franchise, and we should look for another one maybe in three years or so. Should you find yourself working on a sequel, would you have to assume a single ending? Would that complicate things for you?

KL: No. If I were to do a sequel, I would want the sequel to be as different from *BioShock 1* as *BioShock* was from games we made before. I would want to bring as many things into the analog space as I could. *BioShock* is so particular, and such a unique voice, that I don't know if I could ever be comfortable with anyone else doing it besides my team. Especially because so much of the game is the world of Rapture and the gameplay dynamics, which came so much from the DNA of all the work we've done since we started back in the *System Shock 2* days. I would never want to do *BioShock: The Additional Levels*. >

> "I DON'T THINK BETTER GRAPHICS ARE THE FUTURE OF GAMES."

GFW: It seems like a pretty big catch for you: You want to work on new things, but you made something and did it so well that the world and market demand that you stick with it. Were you imagining yourself in that position six months ago?

KL: God. I think six months ago I was imagining going home to spend half an hour with my wife. You know what a soul-consuming process making a game like this is. It's like going to another planet for a year. I realized that when I was about to sell the company that irrational made a lot of games that were critically acclaimed, but didn't sell that great. And certainly it was pretty easy for me to blame the public, like OK, the critics get it—but frankly I don't think that was it. I think that we didn't have the resources before to really commit to a vision, to really see a vision through from start to finish the way we did with *BioShock*. We didn't want to make a game that came out and anybody else could have made it, like make *Call of Duty 5*—and that's no aspersion on *Call of Duty*, because certainly Infinity Ward understands: They created that franchise, and you see what happens when someone else steps in to make a *Call of Duty* game. It doesn't have that stamp on it. You said, "Am I on cloud nine?" The biggest reason I'm on cloud nine is that we got to make not something that was commercially successful or critically successful, but something that people could look at and say, "Oh, yeah, that came from those guys."

GFW: What do you think *is* the mass appeal? Prior to the game's release, a lot of folks assumed *BioShock* would be a huge critical success but that not many people would buy it.

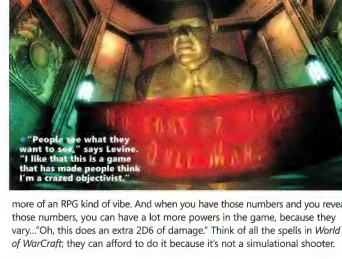
KL: I don't know. There's a bit of lightning in a bottle, to some degree. You had games like *Deus Ex*, and you had games like *System Shock 2*, and they were great games, but they weren't really great shooters, because we didn't really have—at least not on *Shock 2*—the resources to make a great shooter. We couldn't balance and polish and compete with the *Quakes* of the time.

GFW: I don't think people would be having debates about Ryan's version of objectivism if, as you were saying, it wasn't a good shooter in the classical sense from the beginning. What did that mean for you guys? What were the tenets of a good FPS?

KL: [After E3 2006], *BioShock* frankly wasn't lighting up the public the way it lit up the press. Then I started reading all the articles, and it was like, "this adventure game...," "survival-horror/shooter," "RPG"...that's just scary to the gaming public. We decided, OK, we have to say it's a shooter. However, you can't do that and not bring the shooter goods. We all went into student-of-shooter mode...we wanted the kind of action and mass-market appeal that you see in games like *Halo* and *Half-Life*, this high-intensity shooter action that we hadn't really done as much before. We went back and played all these games as students; we analyzed them. We played *Gears of War*, we played *Call of Duty*, we played all these games and said, "What are they doing right? "What are they doing differently from what we want to do? And we just sat there and opened our hearts and our minds and learned from the masters.

GFW: I remember you saying that one of the things that came out of E3 2006 was your decision to make the water interactive—before E3, it was just beautiful water, and people asked if you can *do* anything with the water—so you went back and made that happen. Guys like Denis Dyack say it's best to keep games hidden behind closed doors until the very end, but obviously, you benefited from the back-and-forth with the public.

KL: Oh, absolutely. I think that the challenge of doing a game like this, of any sort of artistic endeavor, is that you want to listen to people...and you *don't* want to listen to people. There are so many things in *BioShock* that were unpopular internally at the beginning that...an artist or somebody [or I] really had to champion and carry through. And you wouldn't believe it if it wasn't in the game right now. There was a time when there was a strong push internally to cut the Big Daddies. They weren't working. The scene where you meet Andrew Ryan had some very substantial detractors, and frankly, I completely understand why. If you haven't played the game through to that point, it's just like, oh my god, this guy's gonna *talk* for three minutes? Are you kidding me? And you're not gonna have control? You sound like an idiot.



GFW: Of all the ideas you prototyped, what were the hardest and most expensive to cut?

KL: A lot of plasmids got cut. At the beginning, before we had really bought into the shooter model, we actually had descriptions of things that said, "This does 2-20 points of electrical damage." Much more of an RPG kind of vibe. And when you have those numbers and you reveal those numbers, you can have a lot more powers in the game, because they vary..."Oh, this does an extra 2D6 of damage." Think of all the spells in *World of WarCraft*; they can afford to do it because it's not a simulational shooter.

GFW: Why no commentary mode of the sort that Valve used with *Half-Life 2: Episode One*?

KL: *The Onion* A.V. Club has something called "Commentary Tracks of the Damned," where they review the commentary tracks of terrible movies—for Uwe Boll movies and stuff like that. You have this director knowing he made this absolute piece of s***, and he's like, "I was really proud of this scene where the heroine takes her top off; it's awesome...." You watch these guys thinking, oh man, they must be contractually obligated to do this thing. I think maybe to do a commentary track before you know it's going to be successful shows a bit of hubris. With *BioShock*, it was more, "do we have the time and resources to do this?" We didn't.

GFW: If you did do the commentary, or if some future special edition happens, what's one thing you would really want to communicate?

KL: It would probably be kind of boring...well, not boring, but technical, and a little geeky. The last thing I want to do is get in there and say, "Here is what *BioShock* really means!" I was uncomfortable at the beginning of our conversation getting too much into that stuff. Because I may feel differently tomorrow about what it means. My sister said the game's like a Rorschach test. People see what they want to see in it, from a gameplay standpoint, from a philosophical standpoint. I like that a lot, and I like that this is a game that has made people think I'm a crazed objectivist, and this is a game that made other people think I'm a rabid Communist. I'm sort of uncomfortable drawing too firm a line as far as what the game is for people. The only time I ever wanted to do that was [in] saying it's a shooter, because I knew we had to sell it, or it would never [sell].

GFW: What about pressure to offer downloadable content? How does that work with attitudes you've expressed about just revisiting and adding extra levels to an experience that you feel is complete as is?

KL: *Diablo II*, to me, was a great model for an expansion, because it enhanced the original game, but also extended the game, too. I'm not a really big fan of expanding things just by linearly adding to the experience, adding a new campaign, as much as I am of enhancing the original experience and adding replayability to that experience. I think that certainly *BioShock*'s combat experience is great, but it could be broader. I'm a little more confused as far as how to expand the narrative experience. Certainly in [*BioShock*].

GFW: So who's *BioShock*'s Guildenstern, then?

KL: [*Laughs*] Who's *BioShock*'s Guildenstern?

GFW: Or Rosencrantz. Your choice.

KL: I'm just sort of pulling [this] out of my butt, because it's not a question I've really thought about, but the player's experience itself has got to be called into question. Because obviously his understanding of the things he went through is not necessarily entirely authentic, as he learns from Andrew Ryan. The experiences you have are more interesting on a second playthrough—there's a lot of *Fight Club* and *The Manchurian Candidate* there. You know that great scene in *Fight Club* where [Edward Norton] is talking to Helena Bonham-Carter; you thought she had spent the night with Tyler Durden, and [Norton] says, "What are you doing here?" And she gets all pissed and walks out, and you're like, "Why is she so mad at him?" And the second time you watch it you realize she's mad at him because they spent the entire night having sex together. That and a thousand other things. There's really a whole other story to tell there if the Tyler Durden character is not there. And again, I am not talking about an actual product—I'm just speaking about what somebody might do if they explored that. I might think differently tomorrow.●

XTRAS

Read more of Ken's post-*BioShock* thoughts in the November issue of *EGM* (#221) and at GFW12.1UP.com.

1UP NETWORK

WARNING!!! VIOLENT SUBJECT MATTER.

SOLDIER OF FORTUNE PAYBACK

When a routine escort mission goes horribly wrong, you find yourself battling an insidious enemy that knows no boundaries. It's up to you to terminate an extremist plot! You know the drill. Get the job done, your way!

AVAILABLE NOVEMBER 2007

PLAYSTATION 3 XBOX 360 LIVE PC DVD ROM

MATURE 17+
M
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Drug Reference
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Sexual Themes
Strong Language
ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org

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ACTIVISION.

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THE FREELOADER PRESENTS

FREE PLAY

The best games that money can't buy

COLUMN

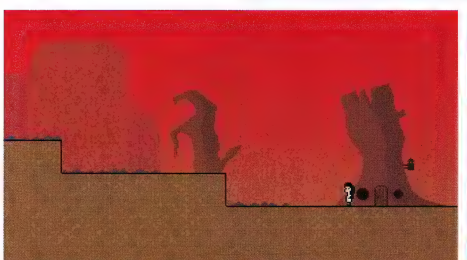
The Freeloader

Know about some sweet free games? Tip off our resident mooch! Freeloader@zdnet.co.uk is the best way to reach him.

Something just blew my mind. Go to www.m-w.com, Merriam-Webster's website, right now and search for the term "freeware." It's there—see for yourself.

Pronunciation: \'frE-,wer\ Function: n: software that is available for use at no cost or for a nominal usually voluntary fee

As nice as it is for my art form to receive recognition, this is only half a definition. Freeware isn't just some "thing." It's a verb. It's a state of mind. To me, it means Flash games that you'll never need to install on your computer. It consists of classics released into the wild, on the house. Free-to-play MMOs make the list. Even mods. It means that this hobby of mine doesn't always require dollar signs (but it sure helps!). This month, I'm corralling a bunch of titles epitomizing that greatness. Put that in your pipe and smoke it, Webster! • The Freeloader



KNYTT STORIES

FILE UNDER: **Design your own 2D game** URL: **http://nifflas.nl2.se/index.php?main=02Knytt_Stories**

XTRAS

FREE GAMES!

You'll find all these games (and more) at FileFront.com. Plus, visit the new online Weekly Free Play column at GFW12.1UP.com.

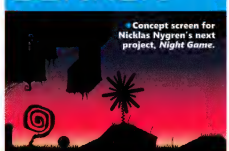
File Front

Knytt—say it with me: "KNIGHT!"—is quickly becoming a household name among the indie gaming kids. That's because Nicklas "Nifflas" Nygren's *Knytt* games aren't just about running and jumping for a couple minutes in simple 2D graphics. I mean, yes, that's exactly what's going on here. Take, for example, the second game in the series, *Knytt Stories*. It's really just one level that lasts maybe a couple hours (upward of four hours if you're slow on the uptake). Search the level for power-ups that let you do everything from jumping higher to running faster like some 2D Bionic Woman, scale walls like Spider-Man—or just create holographic target dummies to distract foes.

All right, so it's a 2D platformer. Great. But what, exactly, is *Knytt Stories* about? A girl named Juni must stop a device that is sucking all the life juice out of the world. Kind of like Galactus—only it's neither a world-dwarfing, overeating giant with really bad taste in headdress nor a gelatinous silvery blob. And that's just the bundled episode. Y'see, aside from "The Machine" and "The Tutorial" episodes, you get a level editor. Go on, build your own levels or download the batches that are already floating all over the Web.

Technically this game is 100 percent free. Download and create more levels to your heart's content, but this is one game that even *I* had to pony up a little cash for in the end. Hit the PayPal donation link. Considering how much value is packed into this tiny download, you know it's the right thing to do. >

CREATOR'S CORNER



• **Concept screen for Nicklas Nygren's next project, *Night Game*.**

I grill Nicklas "Nifflas" Nygren, creator of *Knytt Stories*, about what drives a man to spend 10 months making a free game.

GFW: How's it feel having hordes of mooches like myself as fans of your work?
NN: It's always great knowing that so many people like my games, and I could never have created them without all the help I have received. Remember that a lot of material I use is created by other people.

GFW: Where do you come up with ideas for all this stuff? A lot of old NES games?
NN: For me, it's all about expressing emotions, places, sounds, and images in my mind. But yeah, I do get inspiration from games as well—particularly from laid-back PC and console games with lots of atmosphere like Ballance, Samorost, and Ico.

GFW: Be honest. Are you doing this just to get hired by some mega-publisher?
NN: It would be fun to work full-time with game creation. I never want to get involved in a large company, though.

FAR CRY

FILE UNDER: **My favorite—freetail!** URL: **www.fileplanet.com**

In case ya didn't know, the original *Far Cry* is now available for free—though I wouldn't *exactly* say it comes with no strings attached. Rather, it comes tied to a big bungee cord–sized string: commercials. Yup, this is one of a few ad-supported free games Ubisoft now offers. The deal works something like this: You play the game. You get to a point where you load a saved game, and you see an ad before diving into the action. Not a huge deal in something like *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* (that's one of the other free titles; you can also download *Rayman: Raving Rabbids*), but in a game where you die-load-retry, it gets maddening. Fast. Soon you'll be looking for workarounds and hacks to, say, open the console menu with a "~" and handle quicksaves and quick-loads through that. Not that I would, of course.

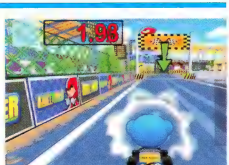
On the bright side, it's not as if the games jam billboards for McDonald's on a deserted island or spray

paint cigarette ads on a camel's hump. It's a bold new world that we're living in, friends. In fact, if all games go gratis like *Far Cry* (I like calling it *Free Cry* now, by the way), freebie-seekers like me will just go the way of the dinosaur. I'm OK with that.

KART RIDER

FILE UNDER: **Mario Kart MMO** URL: **www.nexon.com**

A couple years back, South Korean moochers rejoiced when a little game called *Kart Rider* arrived on the MMO scene, for it was the granddaddy of microtransaction-based games. Yeah, here in the good ol' U.S. of A., microtransactions usually boil down to crappy horse-armor upgrades, but these guys did it right. *Kart Rider* is one of the first games to work the free-to-play model successfully—get players hooked with cutesy racing, and then get 'em to drop a couple pennies here and there for upgrades. Or don't buy anything. Either way, you're spending way less than $14 per month, but you get



a whole lotta bang for your bucks. Now it's coming to America and I'm a little worried. I might actually start spending money regularly on a game and not even realize it. Hey, as they say, your first taste is free.

ROBOCOP 2D TRILOGY

FILE UNDER: **I. Am. Iron Man!** URL: **www.parkproductions.btinternet.co.uk**

My continuing love for all things 2D has been fulfilled by seeing my favorite cyborg (OK, *second* favorite—I still have a soft spot for Dick Clark) represented in classic gaming form. The first installment in this freeware trilogy is an homage to the original Commodore 64/Amstrad CPC/ZX Spectrum side-scroller; the second finds RoboCop fighting against another of moviedom's tin men, the Terminator; and the final tale is a familiar one: Omni Consumer Products cuts corners while trying to cut down crime. Can one mechanoman stand between the world and an army of bargain-basement bots?

INDIE PICK OF THE MONTH

It's not free—but it's close enough!

It's time to pay up. You know the deal. All this dabbling on the dark side of free games has its price. You need to throw some money back to the cause each month. What is worthy of your cash—or at least a demo download this time around? Glad you asked.

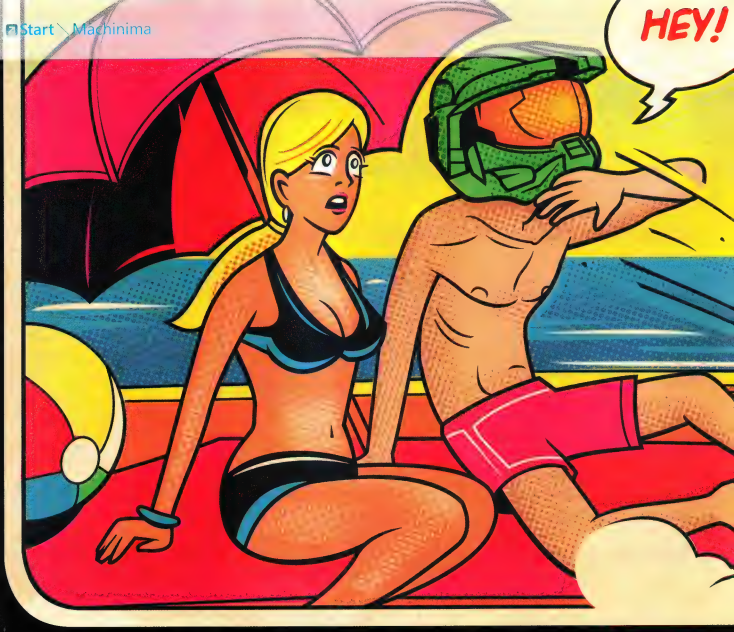
This month, I'm throwing out a hard-core, board-gaming death metal salute to a game called *Armageddon Empires*. That's right—empty your coffers and pray at the altar of hex-mapped, card-dealing, turn-based gaming.

As you may have guessed by now, this is by no means something simple that you're going to wade through in a couple minutes. I'm talking the nerd-iest of nerdy board gaming. Think *Mad Max* meets *Axis & Allies* times 10. Once you get past the learning curve, though, you'll find a deep experience that'll chew up days of your time.

You think it's tough learning to play the game? You should try explaining it in a handful of words! The short version: Four factions vie to control the Earth circa 2345—the Empire of Man, the alien Xenopods, the Machine Empire, and the Free Mutants. Each is armed with unique units, abilities, and power-ups; you take turns building up your army. Virtual die rolls and dropping down cards like a sack of hammers upon foes is how the radiation-blasted West gets won here.

If you're not ready to take on your human pals yet, try fighting off a couple A.I.-controlled opponents instead. The creators at Cryptic Comet insist that the A.I. doesn't cheat. That may be the case—or I may just suck. Either way, a quick trip to www.crypticcomet.com/games/AE/armageddon_empires.html is a gateway drug to dorkdom.

Consider yourself warned.



Microsoft approached *Halo* machinimists Rooster Teeth (makers of the popular *Red vs. Blue* series) with a licensing agreement.

MACHINIMA.

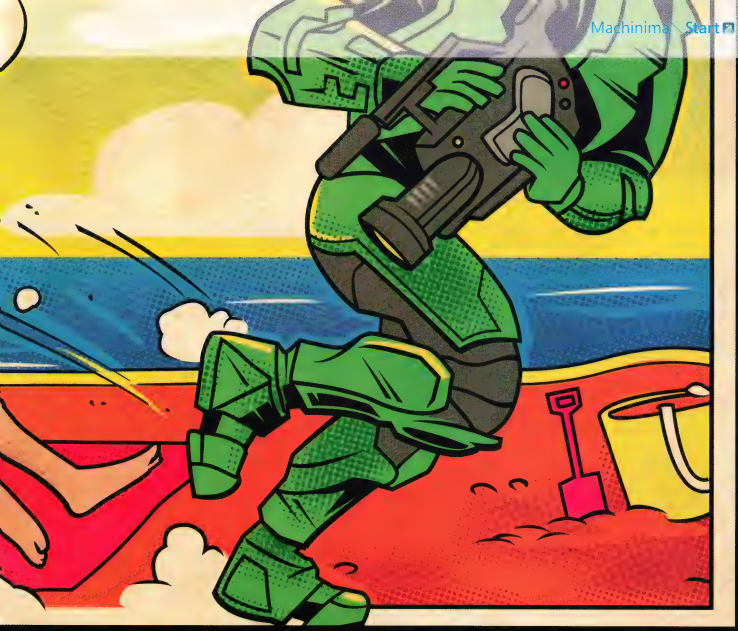
Will game companies kill the goose that

TRENDS

Dozens of sites detail the art of making videos with games, YouTube hosts thousands of examples, and machinima scored pop-culture cred on a *World of WarCraft*-themed *South Park* episode. Given that machinima shorts are free publicity for the games they're made from, you'd think that game companies and machinimists alike would be trading high-fives. But you'd be wrong. Relations between the game industry and the machinima community took a big hit in August, when Microsoft became the first game company to publish explicit rules for what machinimists can and can't do with most of Microsoft's stable of games, specifically the *Halo* series wildly popular among gamers and machinimists alike.

The machinima community went nuclear; as one thread on Machinima.com trumpeted: "SAVE MACHINIMA FROM MICROSUCK." The twin bones of contention are fear and greed. Microsoft wants machinimists to pay royalties if they make any money from their work. Machinima makers seem terrified that Microsoft appears ready to become the machinima Gestapo and squelch any project that doesn't toe the line. The big ques-

ILLUSTRATION BY JOSHUA SUMNER



MICROSOFT, AND MONEY

laid the golden virus?

tion is: Why is Microsoft pissing off a crowd of übergamers who provide millions of dollars of free advertising for the company's games?

MICROSOFT AND MACHINIMA

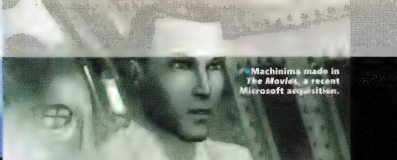
Game companies have always had a love-hate relationship with machinima. On one hand, they're vaguely aware that the videos function as free advertising; on the other hand, they see their characters as, well, their characters, and the companies don't particularly like seeing other people use them for their own creative projects. This ambivalence has resulted in a "don't ask, don't tell" attitude of benign neglect throughout the industry. While some companies (like Blizzard) have cautiously embraced machinima with contests, most firms prefer to pretty much ignore its existence.

It could be argued that, of all the major game companies, only Microsoft has treated machinima seriously. Microsoft was the first company to explicitly license its game-related intellectual property for use in videos, approaching the makers of the popular *Red vs. Blue* with a licensing agreement. Microsoft also purchased (and is marketing) *The Movies*, a Peter Molyneux–developed strategy game with a *Sims*-like animation package, originally distributed through Activision. Given the company's pioneering interest in the art form, many machinimists were surprised and alarmed when Microsoft issued explicit rules for using its stable of games as engines for machinima projects. (See the full list at www.xbox.com/en-US/community/developer/rules.htm.)

The rules were intended to be "pretty standard, but flexible" according to Josh Kerwin, who represents Microsoft's gaming business for the public relations firm Edelman. Indeed, many of them seem, even to the layman, like simple common sense. For instance: "You can't use Game Content to create pornographic or obscene Items, or anything that contains vulgar, racist, hateful, or otherwise objectionable content."

Some of the rules, though, immediately raised both red flags and eyebrows among machinimists. For example, one rule states that "you can't add to the game universe or expand on the story told in the game with 'lost chapters' or back story or anything like that." If taken literally, such a rule would make it impossible to use machinima to create fan fiction—a restriction that would disallow many projects, according to Philip DeBevoise, president of Machinima.com. "It's not at all unusual for a machinima film to back-reference content that's in the rest of the game," he explains.

But the real sticking point in the new rules was the one that dealt with making money with machinima: "You can't sell or otherwise earn anything from



Machinima made in *The Movies*, a recent Microsoft acquisition.

DANCE WITH THE DEVIL

SLIGHTLY LATER MAN

> "SUCH A RULE WOULD MAKE IT IMPOSSIBLE TO USE MACHINIMA TO CREATE FAN FICTION."
> –PHILIP DEBEVOISE, PRESIDENT, MACHINIMA.COM

your Items. We will let you have advertising on the page with the Item on it, but that's it. That means you can't sell it, post it on a site that requires subscription or other fees, solicit donations of any kind (even by PayPal), use it to enter a contest or sweepstakes, or post it on a page you use to sell other items (even if those other items have nothing to do with Game Content or Microsoft)."

This rule would allow distribution of machinima on sites like YouTube, but it would cut off the ability for machinimists to make any income from their projects. "And that's the only form of income that most machinimists are likely to get," explains Mark Methenitis, a lawyer who specializes in computer game law.

MASSIVE REACTION

Predictably, many machinimists reacted with anger and dismay. Machinima has always been something of an underground movement, with a certain punk sensibility to it, according to Hugh Hancock, coauthor of the recently published book *Machinima for Dummies*. "Many machinima videos have a slightly subversive character, and there's a definite 'us against them' mentality when it comes to authority figures," he explains. As such, it was probably predictable that machinimists would react with hostility when told that they were now forbidden from selling even so much as a customized coffee mug on their websites.

Some of the anger was probably due to the way the rules were presented on the Xbox website. Though couched in relatively casual lingo, the rules included the following threat:

"If you do any of these things, you can expect to hear from Microsoft's lawyers who will tell you that you have to stop distributing your items right away."

The rules thus created a "Big Brother" vision of Microsoft, watching and waiting on the Web, lawsuits in hand—an image guaranteed to raise hackles.

The vehement reaction from the machinima community appears to have caught Microsoft by surprise. After discussing the issue on his blog, Microsoft lawyer Don McGowan complained: "Wow. It appears that I got some people's attention. It also appears many of them hate me." McGowan subsequently posted clarifications and explanations, elaborating, for example, that the restriction against unauthorized backstories was to prevent Microsoft from being sued in the event that the official backstory turns out to be similar to an amateur production.

Microsoft also reached out to the machinima community by meeting with a small group of prominent machinimists. Hancock, who was present at the meeting, characterized it as "cordial," and says he believes that Microsoft's heart is basically in the right place. "They certainly don't want to discourage the machinima community, but they do want to be certain that they maintain control of their product," he explains.

One area where Microsoft appears unwilling to budge, however, is the prohibition against making money with a project. Instead, the company has promised to make it relatively easy for machinimists to get a commercial license, according to Hancock. This could allow machinimists to imitate the business model at Rooster Teeth, where products based upon *Red vs. Blue* are sold on the website, presumably generating some kind of royalty for Microsoft.

At first it seems a bit ludicrous: the wealthiest and most profitable company in high tech asking individual machinimists, most of whom are students, for a monthly pound of flesh. But the reasoning behind Microsoft's rules is deeply ensconced in the woolly world of intellectual property law. To put it bluntly, Microsoft wants and feels it deserves a piece of the action, since it owns the *Halo* franchise.

SHOW ME THE MONEY

Microsoft's rules treat machinima as an aftermarket product that builds upon the value that Microsoft put into creating its games. According to this logic, machinimists are simply like the companies that make action figures for hit movies. Since the driver for the sales of the action figures is the movie, the creators of the movie deserve to be compensated for the value that they created.

In other words, Microsoft sees the popularity of *Halo*-based machinima as a reflection of the popularity of *Halo*. By that way of thinking, it's good business sense to restrict usage of the intellectual property so that Microsoft gets its cut, according to marketing guru and best-selling author Seth Godin. "The game companies are smart in being clear in advance, as it's crazy to go after something after it's popular," he explains. "As the games get richer, the ownership of the output is going to be more contentious."

In addition, machinima projects can become so popular that they generate enough Internet traffic to make retail sales into a viable business model. For example, the Rooster Teeth website achieves a million downloads a week, according to Matt Hullum, a principle at Rooster Teeth, the group responsible for *Red vs. Blue*. Since only a portion of the site's visitors download, the total amount of traffic may be enough to make Rooster Teeth profitable. (The company is privately held and did not provide financial data.)

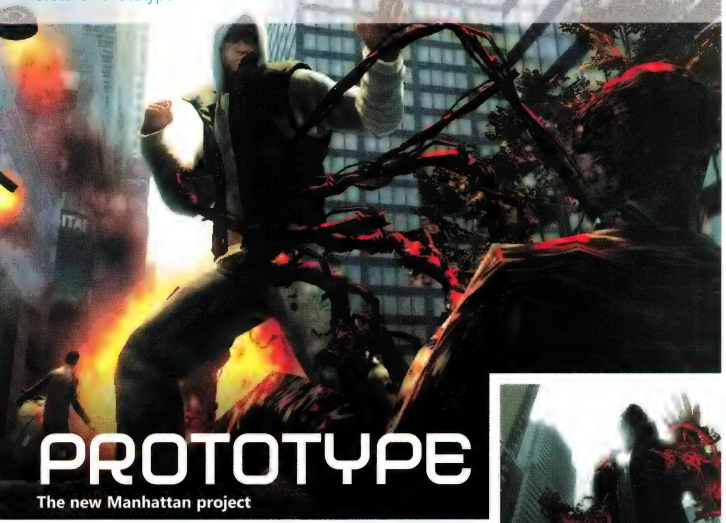
There is, however, an entirely different way to think about machinima—as advertising for the games used to create the video. When viewed as advertising, machinima is an incredible bargain for game companies, which spend big money to convince gamers to buy products and upgrades.

David Meerman Scott, author of *The New Rules of Marketing & PR*, believes that Microsoft may be vastly underestimating the positive impact of machinima on its overall sales. "Viral marketing, the phenomenon of people sharing ideas with their friends, family, and colleagues online, is one of the most powerful ways for companies to get ideas into the market," he explains. "Unlike message-driven advertising, which interrupts people and shouts 'Buy my product,' the ideas passed from one person to another via 'word-of-mouse' is seen as authentic and important."

In other words, having a game "endorsed" by top machinimists is likely far more important, from a financial viewpoint, than the royalty revenues that might be generated by product sales or donations on those machinimists' sites. Under the circumstances, it's hard not to see Microsoft's machinima manifesto as a "penny-wise, pound-foolish" blunder that might drive machinimists away from using Microsoft's games.

Hancock believes that, rather than risk an exodus, Microsoft should instead make it easier for the viewers of machinima to order the games used to make the video. "A required start-up screen on each video with a special website where the product can be ordered is probably the best solution," he says. Another wrinkle might be a fee for the machinimist, similar to that paid by Amazon.com to its associates. Such ideas, however, appear to be falling on deaf ears at Microsoft, according to Hancock. "They 'get' machinima and they know it's valuable," says Hancock, "but they don't yet understand the value of having fans spreading the word about their games in this new and creative way." ■ **Geoffrey James**

HUMAN HISTORY JUST GOT
A LITTLE LESS HUMAN.



PROTOTYPE

The new Manhattan project

PUBLISHER: **Vivendi Games** DEVELOPER: **Radical Entertainment** GENRE: **Action** RELEASE DATE: **2008**

PREVIEW

"*Prototype* is, first and foremost, about choice," says senior designer Dennis Detwiller. "Freedom to do what you want when you want."

You've got to be pretty brave—or possibly a little naive—to make a claim like that about your game nowadays, when Internet cynics will happily hold your words against you come launch day because you can't grow trees as advertised, or because they run into a closed door in your wide-open world.

But "what you want when you want" is what people ask for—and Radical Entertainment at least deserves the benefit of the doubt, as the developer's *The Incredible Hulk: Ultimate Destruction* (Xbox, PS2, GameCube) certainly allowed players to do, if not *any*thing, then a *whole lot* of things. It turned a major metropolitan center into a playground where players could surf on cars, tear out streetlights and use them as bats, rip cars in half and use them as boxing gloves, and hop on top of skyscrapers in a single bound. Within the game's subset of "things you might find in a city," there was some sort of clever use for nearly every one.

Prototype is clearly cut from the same cloth, as protagonist/government-experiment-gone-wrong Alex Mercer rampages through a similarly free-form downtown Manhattan, "weaponizing" his surroundings as he leaps across rooftops. Only instead of tearing off a tank's turret to use as a shoulder-mounted missile launcher, Alex has the genetic potential to absorb the biological entities he encounters and use them to rewrite his own genetic code—and then morph into a new form based on that DNA, replacing his hand with a biological blade, or causing giant "groundspikes" to erupt from the earth and impale foes.

But in a world where every pedestrian you encounter is a potential plasmid, Radical's stuck with very distinct production limits—and tasked with distilling something satisfyingly finite out of what's conceptually boundless. "We have multiple categories of powers," says Detwiller, slicing infinity into four segments. "Attacks, Defends, Sensory, and Disguise." An Attack may morph Alex's arm into a weapon, a Defend may surround him in a protective shell, Sensory powers allow him to see things in a way humans normally cannot, and Disguise allows Alex to take on the appearance of whoever he's absorbed, so foe thinks he's friend. "When the player is in the wrong disguise, alerts are triggered, enemies appear, and the military is suddenly all over the place," he continues. "When the player is in the right disguise, the world is an open book. He can weave in and out of areas where minutes before he was under fire with no fear of discovery." Alex can also access his assimilated victims' memories to learn the whereabouts of mission objectives, secret weapon stashes, or how to better operate a vehicle.

"We don't limit the player in his ability to access powers," says Detwiller, explaining that once Alex >

In *Prototype*, pedestrians are walking health packs. Absorb a passer-by, and there's a chance he or she may know something important.

R F O M . C O M

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absorbs a new power, using it's always just a menu-swap away. "But sometimes, for example, the groundspike is just too much for the situation. Weapons in *Prototype* are there as an option—don't want to fight an Apache in a prolonged engagement? Grab that Stinger missile and bring it down in one shot. Hiding as a soldier and want to remain in disguise? Open fire and watch the madness ensue."

Alex isn't the only government experiment gone wrong. A viral, mutagenic force has infected segments of the city, turning urbanites into rotten freaks, and the military faces off against the infection in a shifting front that Alex can manipulate for his own purposes. "The player can directly change the disposition of areas seized by the military or the virus," says Detwiller. "He can drag forces from one zone into another, causing a conflict. The changes are most definitely *not* just cosmetic."

How, exactly, one learns to generate groundspikes from, say, eating a mutant mailman warrants some explanation. "The Prototype is a creature for whom evolution is a dim memory," says Detwiller. "He's moved *beyond* it—his genetic structure is completely malleable and under his control. These powers are not so much 'absorbed' from targets—though that does occur—as the Prototype *learns* how to more effectively manipulate his genetic structure by advancing through the game." Sci-fi gobbledygook, in other words. Or maybe: "Just enjoy the damn game." ●**Sean Molloy**

> "THE PROTOTYPE IS A CREATURE FOR WHOM EVOLUTION IS A DIM MEMORY. HE'S MOVED BEYOND IT."
>
> – DENNIS DETWILLER, SENIOR DESIGNER

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FEEDING THE JUGGE

Sims fans come in many shapes and sizes, but all find something they can love

CULTURE

Calling *The Sims* a phenomenon doesn't quite do it justice. This is the series that's sold close to 100 million copies since it first appeared in 2000. This is the game so central to EA's bottom line that an entire section of the corporation has been dubbed the "*Sims* division." A *Sims*-related title has been a top-20 seller every month since its debut. (Some historical perspective: The No. 2 seller in its early days was *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire.*) And it's not just the expansions and variations; the core *Sims* game, either on its own or in a compilation pack, regularly reappears near the top of the sales list.

As dismissive as many "hardcore" gamers are of *The Sims*, a hit like this doesn't happen by accident. Who are these millions of buyers? Why are they drawn to the virtual dollhouse of *The Sims*? And what keeps so many of them hooked for so long?

As EA's online services manager for *The Sims* series, Andrea Wendland makes a point of tracking the audience that the game has built. From the moment it became clear that *The Sims* wasn't an ordinary series with the usual gamer appeal, EA and developer Maxis have paid close attention to who *Sims* players are and what they want.

"*Sims* players run the range from 7 to 70," Wendland says. "Our success comes from dealing closely with this very diverse audience." Community outreach has become a core value of the *Sims* division, with regular events for fans and fansites. Where most companies are happy to have a forum devoid of the usual Internet insanity, or maybe a couple of strong unofficial fansites, EA devotes considerable energy and expense to keep *Sims* fans close.

And they have a lot of fans to track. In July, over 2 million users (out of a total registration of 4 million) visited EA's community hub for *The Sims 2*. To date, they've downloaded 57 million *Sims 2* items. By any definition, *The Sims* is one of very few games to penetrate culture at large. "Almost everyone knows what *The Sims* is," says Wendland. "Word of mouth is one of the keys to our success."

SimMaster Sweetie (SimMasters are the community leaders in the official *Sims* community; Sweetie wished for her real name to remain private), has made friends around the world through her involvement with *The Sims*. "When the community was born and began forging itself as an easygoing place to come and talk about the game, I could see users relate to each other," she says. "It's incredible how one game can bring together hundreds of thousands of people who all share one thing in common: love of the game. From my own personal experience, six years ago when I joined the community and began posting on the original *Sims* site, I made friends with people all around the world. Now that I'm a moderator, my list of friends and acquaintances has grown exponentially. Anyone who takes part in the community realizes just how huge it really is."

The key to the series' success seems to be the open-endedness of *The Sims*, and this draws different types of gamers with different interests. Wendland describes *Sims* users in terms of categories, with each one making different demands on Maxis.

First you have your "gamers," by far the largest slice of the audience. Gamers play *The Sims* as it is designed. They control families and pursue aspiration paths. Most people are exposed to the

game in this way. Sarah O. is a new *Sims* player and an example of Wendland's word-of-mouth theory in action. Sarah was introduced to the game by people she knew online. Sarah was drawn to the game because she heard how addictive it could be. "I love addicting games. Beats other addictive things. Also, [I love] the idea that I could create characters in the image of people in my life."

For the gamers, Maxis tries to include new gameplay elements in every expansion. Though some observers find the inclusion of vampires and werewolves an oddity, given how mundane *The Sims* is, they were added by popular demand.

The other three categories consist of people who found that one aspect of the game was most interesting to them and decided to focus their energies there. The easiest to placate are the "dollhousers," the interior decorators of the *Sims* community. For them, the game becomes about creating beautiful living spaces with vibrant colors and matching furniture. Instead of making a Sim work day and night to earn the money to build the happy home, "dollhousers" give themselves unlimited cash to create the bedrooms and dens of their dreams.

Since these needs are so easy to identify and track, Maxis can push out "Stuff Packs," mini-expansions that have nothing but new items to buy. Many of these are built around particular themes (a new *Teen Style* pack is on its way, for example). A few other items are available for download from EA's Sims Exchange.

Once you've tired of designing rooms, the next step is to design houses. "Lot builders" are the architects of the *Sims* community. You can thank this lot for the spiral staircases and new landscaping options. According to EA's research, this is the one subset of *Sims* players that breaks the demographic mold. The game is peculiarly egalitarian in whom it draws—male and female, young and old, all are evenly represented. But not lot builders. These are predominantly men, and they are responsible for some of the more elaborate creations from *Sims* users.

For SimMaster Ralph (like Sweetie, Ralph wishes his real name remain private), lot building is an outlet for his creativity and experimentation. He's made lots based on cruise ships and the space shuttle: "I can spend days or weeks creating a building and the landscape that surrounds it, then put a Sim on it for it to wander around and see how it interacts with the environment." He sees a lot of overlap between *Sims* players and *SimCity* players, largely because of the desire to see what happens when things are set up a certain way. It's the same desire that pokes all of us to create *Sims* based on our own lives. (And that never ends well.) >

AS DISMISSIVE AS MANY "HARDCORE" GAMERS ARE OF *THE SIMS*, A HIT LIKE THIS DOESN'T HAPPEN BY ACCIDENT

The final class of *Sims* players eschews experimentation and design for scripting and control. The "storytellers" are the Woody Allens or Danielle Steeles of the community, using the versatile tools included with the game to make movies and tell tales about their Sims. SimMaster Jen thinks this storytelling impulse is inherent in all *Sims* players.

"Generally, everyone has ideas, dreams, and fantasies; I strongly believe that the *Sims* games provide them with an avenue to play out...these visions. Originally, the idea of being able to play out the 'perfect family-life fantasy' through a game is what attracted me. This gives me as an individual—and probably like other *Sims* players—the opportunity to play out my own philosophy of reality as I see it or would like it to be."

Storytellers take this core gameplay idea to the next level, crafting romantic comedies, fantasy stories, or music videos from the wealth of content Maxis makes available to them. *Sims* machinima of varying quality can be found all over the Internet—tens of thousands of examples are on YouTube alone. The unofficial *Sims* machinima site Sims99.com has thousands more. One can even make a case that the Maxis juggernaut has been a greater boon to amateur filmmakers than *The Movies*, the intentionally film-focused offering from Peter Molyneux's Lionhead Studios.

THE SIMS' SEEMINGLY PERMANENT SPOT ON THE BEST-SELLER LIST IS USUALLY REFERENCED WITH INDIFFERENCE, IF NOT RESENTMENT

With the ability to tap all of these gaming impulses, *The Sims* phenomenon starts to make sense. It's as much a toolbox as a game, and it's easier to design tools for the box if everything you make appeals to someone. For EA, diversity of audience expectations is an asset, since expansions have the potential to "hit people's needs across the board," says Wendland.

Sustaining this momentum depends on a couple of other factors. First, *The Sims* is a very family-friendly game. Beyond the occasional bit of "woo-hoo!" or slapfights, there's little a parent would find objectionable, in spite of the Teen rating.

"A lot of people come to *The Sims* because an older sibling plays," Wendland says. "Then when that the older child moves out to college, the younger one will buy their own copy."

Emily and Sarah O. are two sisters who play *The Sims* exclusively. School and work prevents them from playing other games—they don't even have expansions for *The Sims 2*, Emily admits. But it's proven to be a popular family pastime.

"It's nice, because sometimes we'll sit down and both play together. We've had to make rules for demolishing houses, especially on the neighborhoods where my families take up five or six houses." Both also have friends who play the game, adding more social context to what's otherwise a solo enterprise. But the rules keep Emily and Sarah from messing up a neighborhood.

"We don't let them get in relationships or move in with the other person's family," says Emily. "That tends to break up already good houses or games we were playing with. Although sometimes if we agree, we'll let them switch houses."

The Sims can stay family-friendly for a long time because of the relatively low system specifications. *Sims 2* can run on an 800MHz PC with 256MB of RAM. Almost any low-end machine on the market meets that bar, so if you buy a student a computer for homework, *The Sims* will be one of the few easily accessible games that'll run on it. The game's low system requirements also make it a good option for laptop gamers. And if you've been resisting that computer upgrade for a few years, the series guarantees new content every few months that will still run on older systems.

Those outside the gaming world have also noticed the size of the *Sims* community. EA has entered commercial partnerships with major corporations to make them part of the >

SIMS ON STAGE

Electronic Arts has jumped on the Web 2.0 bandwagon with a new like-to-you make-your-own-video service called The Sims On Stage. Though ostensibly connected to the *Sims* brand, little here involves animated avatars keeping house. This is American Idol meets YouTube, without the mind-numbing commentary of the former or the brainless comments of the latter.

Users can choose from over 3,000 karaoke songs to record, from "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" to "Yesterday." You can record yourself reciting your own poetry, cracking jokes, or telling stories, and EA has regular contests for contributors. Given the popularity of Sims machinima, it was natural for EA to include easy-to-use mashup tools, so you can create that funny music video you didn't have the time or skill to make before. Just drag and drop your images and soundtrack, then upload for the world to see.

"We feel that The Sims On Stage follows the same attributes for which The Sims franchise has long been known—creativity, community, and humor," says Atnah Edelin, a Sims vice president. "We currently allow people to post their creations to over 15 blogs and social-networking sites like Facebook, MySpace, and Blogger."

Like any repository of user-created artwork, The Sims On Stage has its share of hidden talents and embarrassing moments. But the most striking thing is how earnest most of it is. Heartfelt poems about love and loss and reminiscences about favorite family moments live side by side with a middle-aged white guy singing "Respect."

CHARGE THROUGH THE AGES
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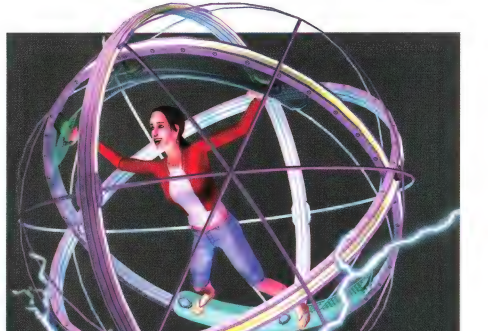
Sims world. Ford Motors allowed two of their designs to appear on the Sims Exchange, including a classic Mustang. Recently, clothing outlet H&M cohosted a virtual fashion show for *Sims* designers, with the winning design earning the right to make a real-world appearance in H&M stores nationwide. "We'll only do this sort of thing if it makes sense for the game," says EA public relations representative Amanda Taggart—but with a brand as flexible as *The Sims*, it's not hard to envision other corporate partnerships in the future.

For all the success of the series, *The Sims* still can't shake the rap among many hardcore gamers that it's not really a game. Its seemingly permanent spot on the best-seller list is usually referenced with indifference, if not resentment. And the *Sims* community is aware of this. "How can a canvas be a game?" says Ralph. "A hardcore gamer believes that a game must have a beginning and an end." Sweetie agrees: "I think that many gamers define a game as a challenge with levels or goals to achieve, missions to fulfill, and an ending. *The Sims* encompasses a different type of gaming challenge."

So what's ahead for EA's cash cow? *MySims*, a stripped-down version of the *Sims* concept, recently arrived on Nintendo's Wii and DS portable systems. And the long-awaited vacation expansion pack called *Bon Voyage* sailed into port in early September.

Beyond that, no one's talking about plans for another expansion or sequel series. But given the size and enduring appeal of the *Sims* games, it's a foregone conclusion that whatever comes next will fly off the shelves.

• Troy S. Goodfellow



SIMCITY SOCIETIES

How the city-building franchise fits in

Sitting at the fan night of Electronic Arts' "casual" spectrum, *SimCity Societies* faces the unique challenge of making municipal planning appealing to the masses—or, at least, more so than its allegedly overcomplicated predecessors.

At its most basic level, *Societies* is just math, as most of the interactions are spelled out in simple arithmetic. Building A generates eight Creativity units. Building B consumes five Creativity units. Hover over the appropriate icon at the bottom of the screen, and you'll see you have a net surplus of +3 Creativity units—third grade stuff, really. only even easier since the game does the subtraction for you. *Societies* becomes more complicated as you fine-tune energies within your town, and you run the risk of choosing buildings simply for their mathematical values (+3 Productivity, -5 Knowledge fits nicely into my current municipal math problem) rather than their aesthetic properties (does it irk you that every dime person in your town is employed as a tuba farmer?). While other *Sims* games, when played as "games" instead of operated as dollhouses, are arguably just as much about balancing equations, the people-oriented *Sims* games seem to do a better job of masking the math from frontier.

Societies does seem to successfully slough off some of the "hardcore baggage" EA was interested in shedding. After plumbing down their first windmill glue *SimCity* sets will wonder when the power line placement tool is—but there isn't one, and the wonderful provide energy to the whole city simply by existing. A lack of maintenance costs means little need to worry that unseen forces will push your budget into the red, a situation that would have basically meant "game over" to a casual player of *SimCity 4*—nothing says "you screwed up royally" like a disheartening deficit spiral.

The flip side, of course, is "where's the risk?"—and perhaps that's just part of the *Sims* secret to success: Don't punish the players. your actions may result in a death in the family you didn't want or a kind of city you didn't necessarily envision—but life goes on, and so does society. Embrace the unexpected opportunities your decisions afforded rather than reflect on what went wrong. **• Sean Molloy**

• Previous *SimCity* games provided less direct control over how your city evolves...

• ...*Societies*, however, spells out causes and effects much more simply and clearly.

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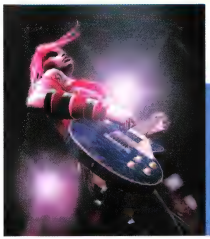
RANDOM ACCESS

10 things we're into this month



1 GUITAR HERO III PC

The game that rocked TVs now tours as a computer near you. The first bonafide port (as console version 3) Play Wyrm 1/58 guitars into your notebook and you have a road show. Hell, you can have an online jam session with Mac players. 2) Since it's a PC game, mods are theoretically possible—though not officially supported. Will jamming in front of a 20-inch monitor make you less cool? Probably, but who's watching?

2 WANNABE DESIGNER

Those who can't, play games. Those who can, make them. We found the Hydra game development kit selling for a mere $200 at www.thinkgeek.com. With it, you can create and play your own NES-caliber creations. People wonder how to get a start in game design. Well, here you go.

3 BIG HACK ATTACK

In the new book, *Exploiting Online Games: Cheating Massively Distributed Systems*, authors Gary McGraw and Greg Hoglund deliver a wake up call for people who play MMOs but rarely think of the security holes involved. A must read for anybody who hits the Web.

4 UNGROUND

When *Grindhouse* hit theaters, the whole overproduced übermovie vibe was way cool. The separate DVD releases of *Planet Terror* and *Death Proof* drop the double-feature gimmick, but at least the deleted scenes have been stitched back together.

5 ALICE IN CHAINS

Everything you know about the classic Lewis Carroll tale is wrong. That's the premise of Frank Beddor's *The Looking Glass Wars*, an evil war breaks out in Wonderland. Check out the second book, *Seeing Red*, and read the *Hatter M* graphic novel.

6 HI-RES DREAMS

Thinkgeek.com sells this badasstastical T-shirt ($14.99-$16.99) that poses the question, "Do 8-Bit Sprites Dream of Hi-Res Tanks?" Yes. Yes, they do.

7 A POXY

Pretty soon, London's Hellgate will finally open for business. Wondering what Flagship Studios' Bill Roper does in his spare time? He sings bawdy songs with his troop, The Poxy Boggards (www.poxyboggards.com), at bars and pub fairs throughout the land. No, seriously. And they're funny to boot.

8 TF2

Team Fortress, welcome home. Conc jumps, we'll miss ye...but oh, the sweet sounds of controlled chaos are back.

9 BLACK SHEEP

Two words. Mutant. Sheep. In the vein of horrible horror like Attack of the Killer Tomatoes!, *Black Sheep* will make you fear mutton. OK, not really, but still...a goofy movie for those that don't mind the bloodshed. Or the accents.

10 FLASH FIRE

It may be a first-person rail shooter, but *Battle Garden* is one cool Flash game. Open fire at www.freewebarcade.com/game/battle-garden.

DEVELOPER DESKTOPS

Jørgen Tharaldsen has witnessed anarchy online with the launch of *Anarchy Online*, helped dream up *Dreamfall: The Longest Journey*, and now works to bring about *Age of Conan: Hyborian Adventures* next March. What's he into when he isn't making games?

WEB

"I'm really into Facebook.com. I download all these dumb applications and make all these friends, but I know it's all just a huge waste of my time. Maybe I should stop."

PHOTOS

"I'm an avid photographer and I couldn't live without my Nikon D80. I try and take it with me on every trip."

MUSIC

"I always have an MP3 player on me. You *never* would've heard of some of my favorite bands, but I'm an avid collector of sci-trance music and electronica."

GAMES

"I've been on the road for a couple weeks now, but as soon as I get home, I'm playing *BioShock*. No phone, no food—I'm not turning on the lights until the game is done."

BOOKS

"Right now, I'm reading J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Children of Húrin*. That's the last book he wrote, and it was edited by his son. Just warning you, though: It's a good book, but it starts very nerdy."

COMICS

"These days I'm into anything by Neil Gaiman. Like his *Neverwhere* series. Finally had a chance to pick up the comics and I love it—it really is an amazing read."

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COVER STORY

"Pick a card, any card," Randy Pitchford shuffles and cuts the well-worn deck. President and CEO of Gearbox Software, Pitchford is a Renaissance nerd: a programmer, a game designer, a war-history buff, and (judging by the atmosphere of humming productivity in his successful game studio) a crack manager. But his real passion is magic. I pull a card from the deck and sneak a peek: the queen of hearts. Had I been distracted by the 12th-floor view of big Texas sky and office towers made of mirrors? "Let me guess: I bet it's a card that the ladies love." Pitchford is giddy at his punch line, something dusted off from years of working as a professional magician in a Hollywood nightclub while paying his way through college. It's a little cheesy, perhaps, but card tricks aren't where Pitchford's true magician skills lie. His greatest trick was transforming Gearbox, in just a few years, from a small-time maker of *Half-Life* expansions (*Opposing Force* and *Blue Shift*) to the sole proprietor of a hugely popular World War II series, *Brothers in Arms*.

"All games are a magic trick, right?" says Pitchford. "We're trying to simulate reality, but it's not real. We're trying to put you in a world that doesn't exist to make you feel like you're there. The whole thing is a magic trick." Below our feet, Pitchford's teams of artists, programmers, writers, and designers are busy hammering away at two very different feats of illusion: *Brothers in Arms: Hell's Highway*, a sergeant's dogged trek through the flames of Germany's last WWII victory, and *Borderlands*, a science-fiction scavenger hunt on a dangerous extraterrestrial settlement. Over the next few pages, we'll explore the inner workings of Gearbox and their games, pulling back the curtain to reveal their sleights of hand without spoiling the joy of being duped by a great illusion. Because, more than anything, Randy Pitchford wants to make you believe it's real. >

MAGIC SHOW

Gearbox Software pulls two rabbits out of one hat

BY ROBERT ASHLEY

Coming down from the high of Allied victory in Normandy, Matt Baker and company fight for their lives in a disintegrating offensive, setting a darker tone for *BIA: Hell's Highway*.

GFW: Let's kick it off with a sweeping generalization: What is Gearbox all about?

Randy Pitchford: We're about making games. Gearbox is private, so we don't have any investors or shareholders, no strings holding us. The guys that founded the company and own it include me and a couple of partners, and we're all gamemakers.

GFW: What sets you apart from other studios?

RP: When we started Gearbox, we wanted to position our company a bit differently than the other shops. You see a couple of types out there: One is the kind of studio that tends to do work-for-hire. They're usually owned by investors, and their goal is to sign the big new movie license. The other kind of shop is like id, Epic, or Valve, where they're only going to create original stuff. We've got some original games that we want to make, but there's so much cool stuff in the world. We want to be able to get involved with properties that we think are really neat. Now we're doing *Aliens*. We worked on *Half-Life* [the expansion packs *Opposing Force* and *Blue Shift*]. We worked on *Halo*. We've had something to do with these big things out there, and we don't want that door to be closed to us.

GFW: How do you choose what kind of licensed games you're willing to work on?

RP: The licensed games tend to be about things that we think are really cool, not necessarily, "What's a movie that's coming out?" *Aliens* came out a long time ago, but that doesn't change the fact that it's a huge fantasy for us to be in that world.

GFW: Are there other movie properties you'd like to work on?

RP: I think there have been a few blurbs about us getting involved with the *Heat* license. You know, it's got Robert De Niro and Al Pacino—the Michael Mann film. It's a hardcore heist story. A couple years ago, I actually went out there and talked to Michael Mann about making a game based on that. I know it's been [over] 10 years since the movie came out, but there aren't many real heist stories in videogames. So I talked to those guys, and we worked out a

BROTHERS IN ARMS: HELL'S HIGHWAY

History as a series of explosions?

Jeramy Cooke pours over a highly detailed computer model of the human eye, spinning it in virtual space to examine the tiny bulges of veins and the way the iris reflects objects on the horizon. Cooke is the director of *Brothers in Arms: Hell's Highway*, and his attention to detail seems to be shared by everyone working on the game, due out early next year. Having turned in back-to-back successes with *Road to Hill 30* and *Earned in Blood*, the *Brothers in Arms* team wants to level up its game. This apparently means sweating the little stuff.

In tones of anguish, team members point out every incomplete object and misbehaving feature in this still-unfinished game: "Ignore the hands! Those hands aren't final. The pacing is off here. Please forget the first 20 seconds. It's a train wreck—we don't have audio." They display an astonishing level of humility considering the stellar production values of *Hell's Highway*. Interactive World War II has never looked so vivid.

HIGH-FIDELITY CAMARADERIE

"I know [the first two games] sold really well, and they were reviewed really well, but we weren't satisfied," says Gearbox head Randy Pitchford. "When *Brothers in Arms* came out, the fidelity of the characters was about as good as it got. But we all thought it sucked. We were just limited by the hardware. We couldn't render facial expression well enough." This was a serious issue for a game in which the central gameplay hook—the ability to order >

licensing deal. But we're so busy [that] we haven't been able to start on that, and we actually don't even know where the option stands right now.

[Note: This part of the interview was conducted via phone prior to our studio visit. At this point, we experience technical difficulties, and upon calling Pitchford back, we notice a familiar voice from *Half-Life* on Gearbox's voicemail system.]

GFW: Was that G-Man on your answering service?

RP: That's Hal [voice actor Harry S. Robins]—he's actually one of the scientists in *Half-Life*. He plays the character of Kleiner [the headcrab-loving eccentric]. He's like that in real life, you know. When you call him up: "Hey Hal, we've got some more work for you. Just wondering if you have any time in April," He's like, [reasonable Kleiner impersonation]: "Well, theoretically, I could be available for some acting, if you can schedule it with me. I believe I can support that effort." He's totally that guy in real life.

GFW: You seem to have your fingers in a lot of pies. You've worked on other people's games with *Half-Life* and *Halo*, made a name for >

Randy Pitchford shows off his magic in an office that doubles as a gaming museum, with every console known to man stuffed and mounted on shelves.

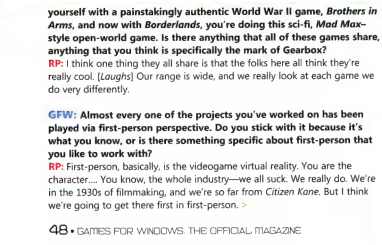
around a squad of soldiers—carried with it major storytelling ramifications.

"We wanted to fulfill the fantasy of being a soldier in a squad," says Pitchford. "I'm no soldier, but what these guys went through is fascinating. Among all that chaos and devastation, this is where friends were made and friends were lost." For Gearbox, *BIA* is an ensemble drama, a study of relationships formed in the crucible of war. "When we all got together and worked on the story, we realized that the meat of it was the brotherhood between soldiers. It came from talking to veterans. We asked them, 'What drove you to stick your head up and fire your weapon at the enemy when you were in the foxhole and there was s*** flying all around you?' You know what they never said? They never said 'duty-honor-country.' That might have had something to do with it when they signed up, but none of them wanted to be cowards. None of them wanted to let down the guy next to them."

AN OBSESSION WITH HISTORY

You don't expect game developers to interview war veterans for the sake of authenticity, but *Brothers in Arms* pushes what is essentially >

Don't tell PETA: The livestock you come across are destructible.



THE CRYING GAME

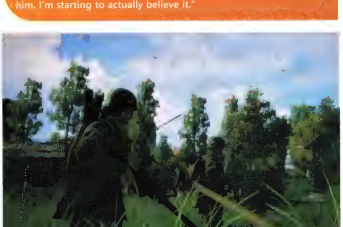
While the visual face-lift in *Hell's Highway* makes for a more convincing warzone, the game's writer, Mike Neumann, hopes that attention to character detail will help him tell a better story: "We're attacking deeper subject matter and trying to emotionally involve the player in things that are a lot deeper than what most other games would try." Neumann plays a cut-scene from a later moment in the game, one in which (without spoiling too much) a recurring character learns that he's been permanently paralyzed from injuries sustained in battle. Early on, Gearbox head Randy Pitchford wasn't sure about tackling the subject in a game: "When Mike was writing the script, I asked him, 'Are we actually going to try to have a character crying in a game and expect that our audience isn't going to laugh?'" To make the moment believable, the *Hell's Highway* team focused on the subtle facial details of human communication. "You can see things in my face when I get excited about something," says Pitchford. "The color changes in my skin. I get more blood rushing to my head. The amount of water in my eyes increases. I might not be crying, but things are happening to me physiologically because of my emotions." Watching the scene unfold, Pitchford and Neumann are satisfied with their creation. "I can see that it isn't a real actor," says Pitchford. "He's a CG character, but I don't feel like laughing at him. I'm starting to actually believe it."

yourself with a painstakingly authentic World War II game, *Brothers in Arms*, and now with *Borderlands*, you're doing this sci-fi, *Mad Max*–style open-world game. Is there anything that all of these games share, anything that you think is specifically the mark of Gearbox?

RP: I think one thing they all share is that the folks here all think they're really cool. (*Laughs*) Our range is wide, and we really look at each game we do very differently.

GFW: Almost every one of the projects you've worked on has been played via first-person perspective. Do you stick with it because it's what you know, or is there something specific about first-person that you like to work with?

RP: First-person, basically, is the videogame virtual reality. You are the character.... You know, the whole industry—we all suck. We really do. We're in the 1930s of filmmaking, and we're so far from *Citizen Kane*. But I think we're going to get there first in first-person. >



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The German tactic of Diefashter (translation: line up in front of the enemy's machine gun) proved to be a disaster.

THE RULE

Gearbox sticks to history, to a point. Any character under the rank of lieutenant is a work of fiction. So while you'll run into the likes of real-life Colonel Robert Sink (who was represented in the HBO series *Band of Brothers* and played by the same actor here), Matt Baker and his boys aren't the real deal.

an action game—a tactical shooter out to compete with the likes of Epic's *Gears of War*—into the territory of historical fiction. While the vast majority of the audience might not be able to appreciate the difference between a meticulously researched historical game and a sepia-toned *WWII for Dummies*, Gearbox seems incapable of approaching the issue from a practical, commercial point of view. They're driven to get it right, partly to satisfy their artistic compulsions, and partly to honor the real people who lived through the events their games reproduce.

"For me, to get the details right means to respect the history and respect the people who fought and died there," says Cooke. "The history in this project is what makes it special. We could reskin some other first-person shooter in a WWII theme, but that's rude to the vets—these people that gave their lives to defend the free world."

And so sitting through a *Hell's Highway* presentation feels a bit like sitting through a history lecture. Randy Pitchford stands at the dry erase board diagramming battle plans, tracing out the Allies' aggressive push through Holland just after their D-day victory, an operation called Market Garden. "It was the largest airborne invasion in history," says Pitchford. "There's never been anything that's even come remotely close since." On September 17, 1944, the 101st Airborne parachuted into Holland with the intention of securing a route for a major invasion of Germany. Holland was far enough away from the action that war planners counted on an easy time for their forces. Unfortunately, Germany had several elite divisions stationed in the area for training. The result was a disaster for the Allied forces and Germany's last major victory in the war. >

GFW: So what, as you see it, are the steps along the way to getting to that *Citizen Kane* of games?

RP: Obviously, we have a lot to work on with respect to storytelling. But the big hurdle is that videogames started entirely as a skill test. Our roots are things like *Pac-Man* and *Space Invaders*, where it is 100 percent a reaction-time test. We still have a lot of game designers that care about skill tests, and for game players, part of the reason that they play is to overcome challenges. But interactive entertainment means a lot more than that today. We're really getting into a space where our business is fantasy fulfillment. The game designer's hurdle is that games imply challenge, and challenge implies work, and work is not a synonym for fun. We like beating skill tests, and we like using our minds to solve puzzles. But we're also playing for an experience, for fantasy fulfillment. A lot of people play *Brothers in Arms* because they're interested in what it would be like to be one of the *Band of Brothers*, to be in *Saving Private Ryan,* not just to watch it. For a lot of those people, if we go too far with the challenge, they're not going to be able to get that experience.

GFW: When we spoke about *Brothers in Arms* a while ago, you said that you feel obligated—because of its historical nature and because of the people that you're working with on it—to make it challenging. Or, if not necessarily challenging, then to make it *feel* threatening.

RP: Feeling challenging and feeling threatening are a bit different than losing. It's not necessarily a guarantee that every player has to lose in order for them to feel like a game is a challenge.

GFW: *Resident Evil 4* did exactly what you're saying: It seems more difficult than it actually is. The whole way through, you're feeling

"OUR BIG HURDLE IS THAT VIDEOGAMES STARTED AS A SKILL TEST."

--RANDY PITCHFORD, PRESIDENT/CEO, GEARBOX

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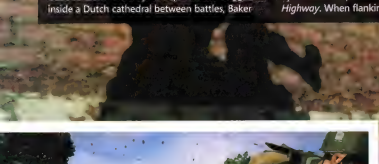
HAUNTED BY THE PAST

This setting establishes a darker mood for the entire game. Sergeant Matthew Baker, the player character from *Road to Hill 30*, returns in *Hell's Highway* worse for wear.

"Imagine having to put your best friend in harm's way, pretty much knowing that what you're asking him to do means he's going to get killed," says Pitchford. "I don't know, maybe I could do it, maybe I couldn't, but I've never been tested like that. These men were, and it starts to affect Baker. He's haunted by the memory of his dead soldiers." Literally. In a quick scene triggered inside a Dutch cathedral between battles, Baker spots a pair of thick-framed glasses and slips into a hallucination. Pfc. Leggett, a key character killed in the first game, seems to speak to him from the grave. "So there's this question," says Pitchford. "Can Baker deal with the burden of being a squad leader, or is he going to snap?"

New characters brighten up the mood: Frankie, an underage and overeager private, clamors for respect, but he mostly takes s*** from his older squadmates. Jasper, the comic relief, names his trusty bazooka "Stella" and talks to it as if it were his girlfriend. Jasper also represents the jacked-up destructive power of Baker's squad in *Hell's Highway*. When flanking around the enemy doesn't suit you, you can now call in your bazooka team to obliterate the opposition's cover. The game, far from the small-arms-and-rifles focus of the original, now reaches ecstatic levels of destruction: Machine guns gnaw through wooden fences; the slow-motion camera kicks in when multiple enemies get caught in your grenade blasts, smoke and dirt flying in your face. On the receiving end, you can now take cover realistically, digging in behind sandbags or walls in third-person view. Though the team still frets over the tiniest of details, Pitchford isn't hedging his bets: "There's no doubt in my mind that *Hell's Highway* is the greatest thing we've created."



The *Hell's Highway* team loves showing off their dirt-plowing explosions.

WHEN FLANKING AROUND THE ENEMY DOESN'T SUIT YOU, YOU CAN NOW CALL IN YOUR BAZOOKA TEAM.

APPETITE FOR DESTRUCTION

Leave it to Randy Pitchford to come up with a historically plausible excuse to load up *Brothers in Arms*' lead Matt Baker with enough explosive force to take down a building. "Baker's been moved to a recon unit, which is attached at the headquarters level, and at the headquarters level they have better assets: bazooka teams, machine-gun crew, bigger weapons that can do more damage." It's totally *not* about watching Nazis get blown apart by giant explosions in slow-mo. As for the methodical, tactics-based engagements of the first two games, Pitchford says that these new, more powerful toys won't meat-head things up: "It does make us feel more powerful, but it also gives us different tactical implications, more decisions, more options that we can use to deal with the situation." Option No. 1: Blow them to kingdom come.

tense and anxious, but when you go back and count the number of times you died and restarted, it's definitely not as bad as previous games in the series.

RP: I agree that they've definitely made that game more accessible and less challenging without making it less intense. But even there, you still get killed. You could imagine a dream game being such that you almost die, but don't. You feel always on the edge.

GFW: We're talking about the idea of challenging players with tests of skill, but what about challenging players with new experiences?

RP: One decision when you're creating something from scratch is how original are you really going to be? Where are you going to take cues? Where are you going to do something that's never been done before? The further we get from familiarity, the more we risk not having an audience. But the closer we are to familiarity, the more we risk not interesting an audience, because someone's already been there before. You have to ride that line with every decision you make. >

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FROM WWII TO PLANET PANDORA

For a studio so thoroughly obsessed with the historical particulars of World War II, Gearbox's move toward sci-fi in *Borderlands* might seem odd. According to Randy Pitchford, however, their research skills still come in handy. "All of our wildlife and foliage are based on real-world examples—things from prehistory or things that currently exist. Aside the distinctly Jurassic appearance of the species in the screenshots on the following pages—kid. We do a lot of research into unusual symbiotic relationships, unusual bugs and insects, deep-sea creatures, all the really strange things that exist on this planet, and we transport them to Pandora." But sometimes truth is too strange for fiction. "Some of these things nobody's going to believe. There are caterpillars that, in order to keep birds from smelling their waste, will fling their poop several feet away." Earth's ecology inspired *Borderlands*' version of the exploding barrel: a venom-filled cactus. "It was based on a kind of plant that will actually pop in order to get their spines flying through the air. So we thought: 'What if they popped just a little more dramatically?'"

BORDERLANDS

Satisfy your gun lust in the wastelands of Pandora

"I guess I'll just put it out there," says Gearbox chief Randy Pitchford. "There are over half a million different guns in *Borderlands*."

Humans are often driven to ridiculous extremes. We take a practical notion—the need for a good weapon on a planet filled with hostile alien wildlife, say—and stretch it to the ends of reason. Half a million guns in a videogame... A quarter-million just wouldn't cut it? "You can think of every gun in every shooter that's come out over the last three years, and all the guns in all the shooters that are going to come out over the next two years, and *Borderlands* has more," Pitchford continues. "It has two orders of magnitude more." While a hardcore player may never see more than a fifth of those guns, the gargantuan figure is emblematic of Gearbox's ambitions for *Borderlands*, scheduled for >

GFW: Do you think *Borderlands* is a risk for you in that respect? Where on that spectrum of novelty and familiarity does it land?

RP: *Borderlands* is a huge risk. I tend to think about a game in terms of story, style, and design. And story isn't plot. It's the who, where, when, and why. Style is about look and feel, audio direction and art direction. Design is: What kind of game is it? What buttons do I press, and what feedback am I getting? How am I interfacing with this world or this experience? If you break down *Brothers in Arms*, we invented a lot in design with the squad gameplay, but we took almost zero risks in terms of style. Our style was guided by the history and prior media. We said, OK, we want to look as much as possible like a WWII film. For story, we lifted that from history. We know those stories, and we know that people love them, so it wasn't very risky. With *Borderlands*, we're taking risks on all three fronts, but there *are* influences. It's a first-person shooter, and it brings in some of the motivations we have when we play *Diablo*: I want to get a better gun. I'm always interested in the new weapon, like I was when I was playing *Diablo*. The story is total science fiction, and certainly there are influences, everything from *Mad Max* to *Firefly*—a little *Indiana Jones* for good measure. As for style, the art direction wants to be a plausible and realistic world, but it's also got some invention in the way things look. There's a huge amount of invention in the creatures that live on the planet of Pandora in *Borderlands*. That's a place for us to invent, but it's also risky because we're not sure what people will think of the stuff we invent.

GFW: Is it creatively limiting to think about games in terms of what's come before?

RP: The reality of business is if there's a market, you're more likely to have a customer than if there isn't. I'm not saying it's a good thing to follow people and to copy, but *Brothers in Arms* is a game that we wanted to make for a long time, and it wasn't until [2002's *Medal of Honor:*] *Allied Assault* that we felt confident that we could actually be successful doing it. That's when we started thinking about the game and planning it. I wouldn't have done it if there wasn't a market there. It would have been too risky. There are so many

games that we can make, and there are so many things that we could do. I want to do things that are going to be relevant. If I'm an entertainer, then my metric for success is: How many people did we reach, and what did they think of it?

GFW: Going back to the theme of challenging your audience, do you think that, by returning to the ever-popular sci-fi and war themes, you're not adequately challenging the audience on that level?

RP: Well, what we're offering is fantasy fulfillment, to both ourselves and other game players like us. So it's less about trying to say, "Here's a world you never thought of. Are you interested in spending time here?" What we're saying is: "Here's a world that should be somewhat familiar to you, a world that you already enjoy. Here's an interactive fantasy where you can be part of that, not just watch it or read about it, but play it." That's what videogames offer us. So in that case, no. Our goal is fantasy fulfillment.

This walking fortress plays host to the pterodactyl-like Rakk.

GFW: Whose fantasy? Who do you imagine your audience to be?

RP: Well, they're different. There are several different customers who are interested in *Brothers in Arms*: There are the subject-matter enthusiasts—and I'm one of them—who are fascinated by WWII. There are the first-person shooter customers who are attracted to the differences between *Brothers in Arms* and some of the more linear game experiences. And then there are all kinds of other people: guys who are interested in storytelling games; guys who are looking for the next big triple-A game, whatever it is. There are plenty of guys that are subject-matter agnostic. I love the WWII subject, and I could probably teach a class on war history, but I'm happy going from real soldier in World War II to space

release in 2008. It's a sci-fi swing for the fences from a studio known for its World War II fare the *Brothers in Arms* series.

The game unfolds on rough-and-tumble planet Pandora, a galactic Wild West for humans willing to risk life and limb in the pursuit of quick riches. It's not a nice place. Bandits, having broken free from established human settlements, plunder and terrorize the "civilized" population. A variety of aggressive native species seem eager to kick the invaders out of their food chain. And discoveries of advanced alien tech caches have driven Pandora's explorers into a frenzy of greed, a futuristic California Gold Rush. Playing as one of three characters—the sneaky sniper Mordecai, the hell-raising tough guy Roland, or the alien tech-enhanced Lilith, you seek out this wealth in an open world. Presumably, you find a few guns along the way.

DEATH IN THE DESERT

"*Borderlands* is a first-person shooter," Pitchford and company tweet again and again, a simplification meant to keep twitchy shooter fans from tuning out at the mention of complexity. As Matthew Armstrong, the game's director, takes control of Mordecai, however, he finds himself in a classic role-playing game situation: shopping for goods in the safe zone of a town, in this case the Pandora settlement of New Haven. Here, the pop-culture worlds of sci-fi and Western collide to form a future both neon-lit and dusty, digital and mechanical. Mordecai visits the local gunsmith for a new piece, a shotgun with LED accents, and heads out to his garage to select a ride. There, he joins forces with a fellow *Borderlands* team member to demonstrate the game's already functioning cooperative play. "One week after we started working on this project, we were co-op," says Pitchford. "We've been co-op every day ever since." The game supports up to four players in a party, each able to come and go in a friend's game as they please, taking any items or progress made with them. >

Shopping for new guns has never been so easy: Simply kill, kill, kill.

HERE, THE POP-CULTURE WORLDS OF SCI-FI AND WESTERN COLLIDE.

marine saving the world from aliens. I'm interested in big fantasies and solid gameplay. I'm interested in high-quality, crafted entertainment experiences.

GFW: Where did you pick up your interest in WWII?
RP: I'm the first guy in my family from about as far back as we can trace who hasn't been in the military. My grandfather retired a lieutenant colonel, and he fought in WWII. Ever since I was a kid, I'd hear the stories and watch all the movies. I've always been fascinated by it. And my fascination was probably a little deeper than most people's, to the point where I've read a lot of books on my own. I'm reading Audie Murphy's book *[To Hell and Back]* right now. He was the most decorated soldier in the U.S. Army's history, and he fought in WWII.

GFW: How did you translate that love of history into a first-person shooter?
RP: I was reading books. I was watching war films, both the good ones and the bad ones, and I loved them. So, as an adult making videogames, it got to a point where it was clear there was a market [for WWII games] and that I could have the opportunity to get in deep. And instead of making what fundamentally amounted to a *Quake*-style game wrapped in WWII textures, I wanted to go in and cover something that actually happened.

GFW: And so the *Brothers in Arms* obsession with historical detail began....
RP: If I'm making a film and I care about the craft of filmmaking, am I just going to make up a bunch of stuff and pretend my actors can talk like soldiers, or am I going to figure out what it's really like and use the medium to get in there and become one of these guys? We took that approach with the game.

GFW: What do you think accounts for that change in the trajectory of your family, from this military legacy to you becoming, of all things, a videogame designer?

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THE CHANGING WORLD OF BORDERLANDS

Pandora, *Borderlands*' planetary wild West, is "pretty damn huge," according to the game's director, Matthew Armstrong, but it's not a mess of randomized sand dunes and rocks. Every area is crafted and permanent. Anything living in the world, however, can move around the map in surprising ways. "We know where the mud coast is," says Armstrong. "We know what the world is shaped like, but where the *things* happen to be at any given time or where every bunker is—that's up for grabs." So seeing out into salt flats—with or without a mission—will provide plenty of opportunities for grabbing loot.

"Every time you play, things are moving," says Armstrong. "The world is alive, so *things will be different every time.*"

The Gearbox duo hops into a dune buggy, what the game calls a Runner, decked out with a rocket launcher and a driver's-side machine gun, because there can never be too many guns in *Borderlands*. Bouncing through sand dunes in the desert outside town, the crew finds itself in a fight. Bandits, in a death-mobile of their own, come over the horizon. Team Gearbox jockeys for position, taking small arms fire before landing a rocket on the bandit buggy, which explodes with a satisfactory pop; like a bug squashed underfoot.

ADVENTURES ON PLANET SHOPPING

Approaching the bandit stronghold, a mining facility surrounded by rusty pipes and industrial debris, the duo set out on foot, playing cat and mouse with scores of whip-smart A.I. opponents. When a nearby bandit falls, dropping an unusual-looking weapon on the ground, we get a lesson on the true nature of *Borderlands*: It's not a first-person shooter or an RPG. It's a shopping adventure. "We wanted to motivate players like a good game of *Diablo* [does]," says Pitchford. "When I play that game, I can't stop because I want to find that better weapon." Thus the 17-million guns. With so many variations, Pitchford hopes to tap into the player's lust for gear and game world power. "It's about the whole feedback loop of collecting things, getting more and more powerful, and reaching a point where you can dominate something that might have been a problem earlier on. That feels really good."

Before the shooter jocks give in to visions of elaborate menus and statistical comparisons, consider the simplicity of *Borderlands*. Armstrong approaches the bandit's weapon and, at a keystroke, equips it. "That's a shorter-barreled machine gun, so it's less accurate," says Armstrong. "I can tell just by looking at the thing." The design of the weapons in the game is such that players should be able to intuitively understand the basic properties—power, accuracy, rate of >

RP: I don't know.... My father was in the intelligence community in the military, and he's a geek. I actually don't know a lot about my father's involvement. He was in Vietnam, but he wasn't a combatant. I think he built computers and communications devices to help the agents communicate. At home, we always had—I'm talking in the early to mid-'70s—we had computers in our house. Before the Apple existed, he built a machine. One of the machines he had given me, he wrote the BIOS, and the box itself was wood that he'd cut and laid in our garage. He made the circuit board himself and soldered all the integrated circuits onto the damned thing. It had like 4K of RAM, and I was able to write in BASIC.

GFW: So your inner nerd blossomed early?

RP: I just totally got the bug [and] started programming when I was really young. We had an Atari C-380, which was like a *Pong* machine, circa 1976. It didn't have a cartridge slot, just seven preprogrammed games in it. I'd play that thing, and then I'd mess around with one of these computers and try to imitate what I was seeing. So I've always been exposed to technology, and it just became a big part of my life. And as I was growing up, I did shows and school plays. I was on the speech and debate teams in high school for four years, and I always liked getting in front of people and entertaining. This combination of technology and entertainment just fit for me.

GFW: How did your family react to your career?

RP: Oh, it was tough at first. When I graduated from high school, I was going to go to Harvard, and I basically freaked out and said no.

"I'M THE FIRST GUY IN MY FAMILY WHO HASN'T BEEN IN THE MILITARY."

RANDY PITCHFORD

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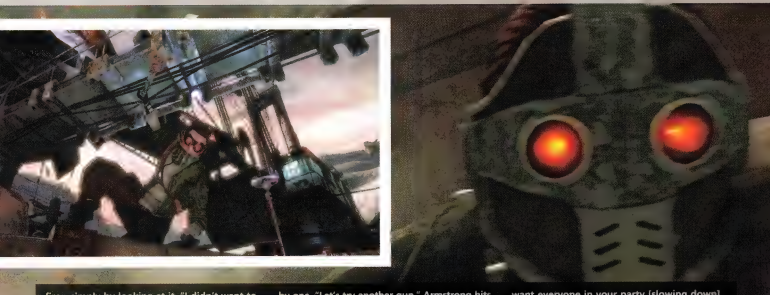

fire—simply by looking at it. "I didn't want to have 500,000 guns, where you just spent the whole day looking at stats," says Armstrong. "It's a fast-paced action game, so you have to be able to make those decisions on the fly."

A PEEK AT THE PLAYGROUND

Mordecai spawns in a textureless room surrounded by blue doors. The space isn't part of the world of *Borderlands*, rather, it's a testing ground for game mechanics. Beyond one blue door, Armstrong triggers a "skeet shooting" demonstration. Waves of rag-doll enemy characters shoot from the ground as if fired by cannons. Mordecai picks them off one by one. "Let's try another gun." Armstrong hits a key, and weapons stream from the center of the screen like water from a fire hose. Pistols, shotguns, rocket launchers, and all their half-breed children cover every available surface in a thick layer of metal. He spots a snub-nosed revolver that looks promising: "This is a nice gun. If it had a scope, I'd be happy."

Walking out into an empty patch of desert, he approaches a large watery bubble. It's a test sample of one of Lilith's special powers: time distortion. "In most games, when people do time effects, they're just slowing down the speed of the game," says Armstrong. "Because we're co-op, we don't want everyone in your party [slowing down] because one of the characters does. We wanted something localized, which is pretty damn tricky." He takes a few shots at the bubble and watches as the rounds slow to a crawl in the distorted field. "Let's say you have a big burly creature coming at you," says Pitchford. "She can create a bubble around it, and everyone can gather round and mess it up. Or if somebody's shooting at her, she can put a bubble in front of her so that she can *Matrix* out of the way." It's a highly original idea, an indication that what Gearbox has shown is just a taste of what *Borderlands* might become.

I went to community college for three years and just lived in my parents' house. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do, but I was sure that I didn't want to become a lawyer or a doctor. When I started taking classes at UCLA, I was going to go down the law path, but my wife, who was my girlfriend at the time, helped me realize what I actually cared about. She helped me turn my hobbies and my passions into a career. At first, though, I think that was a big problem for everybody. Imagine your kid tells you: "I'm gonna be a rock star!" Then imagine: "I'm gonna make videogames!" At least you've heard of some rock stars that have made money. Videogames back then, it was like, "What are you talking about?"

Robert Ashley and Shawn Elliott

XTRAS

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GARMIN 660
Reviewed By: Chuck on 1/16/2007
Tech Level: Tech Level: high - Ownership: 1 week to 1 month
Pros: The Nuvi 660 really performs really really well. Linking to your FM Rx in the car is effortless. Playing MP3's is a breeze and the quality is excellent (this could very well be your car FM antenna is off of the rear window) - not quite CD quality but close. Navigation is better than my neighbor's Acura although is NAV is also two years old and could be a factor. Bluetooth connection was effortless
Cons: None thus far
Protect Your Investment
Special Offers
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Outstanding GPS!
Reviewed By: Sam on 1/2/2007
Tech Level: Tech Level: high - Ownership: 1 week to 1 month
Pros: Works flawlessly, seamless online update, FM transmitter sounds great when playing mp3 from my 2 GB SD card. Host of features. Top of the line.
Cons: None thus far

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Reviews

Opinions you can trust

Team Fortress 2's Pyro, Heavy, and Spy cop your heart.

THIS MONTH IN REVIEWS...

As we close the door on the first year of *GFW*'s publication, I figure it might be fun (in a really nerdy sort of way) to do a bit of statistical analysis on our reviews to date. We do enough preaching (on our weekly podcast and on this page's score breakdown every month) about what our scores mean and what the definition of "average" is. So, let's look at how our first year's numbers break down, shall we?

Up to and including the stuff covered in this issue, we've published scored reviews of 133 games. Of those, 20 of them—approximately 15 percent—received Editors' Choice awards (that is, a score of 9 or higher). Our most prevalent score is 7 (I'm lumping the odd 7.5s in here, too), with 25 such scores handed out...barely skating by the runner-up score, 6 (with 23 games claiming this number). In terms of broad definitions, our 5-6.5 "Average" range again *just* loses out (45 games) to our 7-8.5 "Good" range (48 games). Ultimately, our mathematical average score for the year is 6.5 out of 10.

It's worth noting that we don't review *everything*, either—a lot of the obvious vat scrapings get chucked so we can devote pages toward worthier pursuits, otherwise I'd expect these numbers to be very different (i.e., lower). Do we love everything too much? Hate everything too much? Let us know at gfwletters@ziffdavis.com. **Ryan Scott, Reviews Editor**

INSIDE

WEIRD
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SCORE KEY

GFW uses a 10-point scoring scale to inform you, at a glance, whether or not a game is worth your hard-earned money. We strictly enforce a score of 5 as the median, meaning that any game receiving a score of 6+ is certainly worth playing—at least to some extent. Here's how the numbers break down:

Editors' Choice award
Any game earning a 9 or higher receives a *GFW Editors' Choice* award, signifying the very best in PC gaming.

9–10: Excellent
Games here provide extremely recommendable.

7–8.5: Good
Enjoyable throughout, with minor flaws.

5–6.5: Average
Worth a look. Only genre enthusiasts need apply.

3–4.5: Bad
Significant flaws or fundamental design failure.

1–2.5: Terrible
Several awful flaws mean avoid.

MEET THE CREW

REVIEW CREW
1UP NETWORK

The Review Crew is the 1UP Network's ensemble cast of game critics from all of our print and online publications. We believe that games are more than the sum of their parts, so we tackle them subjectively, as *experiences*.

JEFF GREEN
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Jeff put the tyrannical reign of his *WOW* guild on hold this month to play *Neverwinter Nights 2*. Nice guild commitment there, pal.
Current Faves: *World of WarCraft*
1UP.com Blog: GFWJeff.1UP.com

RYAN SCOTT
REVIEWS EDITOR
Hell's frozen over: This sworn anti-FPS freak's actually playing—and enjoying—*Team Fortress 2*. WTF?
Current Faves: *Team Fortress 2*
1UP.com Blog: GFWRyan.1UP.com

SHAWN ELLIOTT
STAFF EDITOR
The weekend before this bio was written, Shawn pulled the typical MMO-like ragequit over *TF2*'s Pyro being overpowered. Sissy!
Current Faves: *Half-Life 2: The Orange Box*
1UP.com Blog: GFWShawn.1UP.com

MATTHEW CHASE
STAFF REVIEWER
Matthew misses the ample opportunities to say hapless roleplayers during the good old days of *Ultima Online*. Prithee be quiet.
Current Faves: *Guild Wars, City of Villains*
1UP.com Blog: carnifex.1UP.com

GORD GOBLE
STAFF REVIEWER
Gord's everyone's hero this month, having reviewed no less than four racing games for us and visited magazine *EGM*.
Current Faves: *Race 07: The WTCC Game*
1UP.com Blog: gordhollo.1UP.com

ERIC NEIGHER
STAFF REVIEWER
Eric was once banned from a *Counter-Strike* tournament for being "too sexy for his Kevlar." His clan won anyway.
Current Faves: Anything that isn't *Halo 3*
1UP.com Blog: TheFirmFemSauce.1UP.com

JOE RYBICKI
STAFF REVIEWER
Joe has been playing PC games since "graphics" meant the art on the front of the *Zork* manual.
Current Faves: *BioShock*
1UP.com Blog: GFWJoeR.1UP.com

MATTHEW SAKEY
STAFF REVIEWER
Matt's been a consultant and journalist in the games business for years, and he still has to convince people it's a real job.
Current Faves: *BioShock, S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*
1UP.com Blog: msakey.1UP.com

1UP NETWORK
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I'M ALT-TABBING BACK IN THE SECOND I FINISH THIS SENTENCE

• *TF2*'s talkative characters trade barbs while battling.

THE ORANGE BOX

Team Fortress 2, *Half-Life 2: Episode Two*, and *Portal* are available individually over Steam—or as part of the retail *The Orange Box* package, which also packs in copies of *Half-Life 2* and *Episode One*. For the download-adverse, the latter's a steal at a mere $50.

• Medics "übercharge" allies for limited indestructibility. Valve's solution to stalemate and stacked defense.

TEAM FORTRESS 2

Class act

PUBLISHER: Valve Software/Electronic Arts DEVELOPER: Valve Software GENRE: First-Person Shooter AVAILABILITY: Retail, E-tail (www.steampowered.com) ESRB RATING: Teen
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 1 GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 7GB hard drive space, Internet connection MULTIPLAYER: 2-24 players VERSION REVIEWED: Mac/Pixel Reviewable

• **Spy costumes show up as loose-leaf paper masks to allies. To opponents, they're indistinguishable from the real deal.**

REVIEW

EDITORS' CHOICE Games for Windows

Grenade-free *Team Fortress?* Ain't that a teatless Holstein (as the red-vs.-blue FPS's hayseed Engineer would word it)? A refresher in two shakes for the rusty: Each and every class in 1999's *Team Fortress Classic* packed pineapples and—Sniper excluded—a second, role-specific bomb. The latter individualized kits and gave the game a fingerprint identifiable in any suspect pool: ultramobility on maps blueprinted to act as both runway and launching pad. To blow the lid on my bias, this is mostly a Scout- and Medic's-eye view. But then these were "my" classes. If you played, you had yours, too, because just like an arcade fighting game—*Street Fighter II*, *Tekken*, whatever—that's how it worked. Nine years (as Valve managing director Gabe Newell reminds us in *Team Fortress 2*'s rich commentary mode) is a whole hell of a lot of time to wear one pair of sneakers. No replacement's a comfier fit, no matter how much nicer it is.

Although an officially published follow-up to the original *Quake* total-conversion mod called *Team Fortress*, *Classic* too was foremost the work of modmakers, the product of übercore gamers writing code in a time at odds with today's trendy all-inclusiveness. Then, privileging hand-eye Olympians was a target to shoot for; with today's megabudgets and need to break even by appealing to wider audiences, it's a taboo. So while *TF2* doesn't demolish entry barriers, it absolutely installs less-resistant paths. Now, for instance, the Medic asks that you smoosh a button, sweep a first-aid hose in a buddy's vicinity, and not much more. In addition, a new "critical hit" feature multiplies attack damage at random, at times equalizing long odds. You read that right: critical hits—what dungeon raiders and dragon slayers roll. No, these are definitely not my shoes. Or so I thought. Forty-hours experienced at the time of writing, I no longer know what I did without 'em.

FORTRESS FOREVER

Even in the supreme skepticism of that reactionary day one—not knee-jerk, just genuinely alert—I loved, *loved* *TF2*'s cosmetic makeover. "Cartoon come to life" isn't compliment enough. Some cartoons are better animated, more distinctively stylized than others—and, by analogy, this is among the best. The game's piss-and-vinegar crew snarls, winces, bellows, and sneers. From the Road Runner Scout to the Wile E. Coyote Engineer, they backpedal and leap with human momentum, and their absurd flag quests and wall-to-wall bases become a kind of Cold War Merrie Melodies. (To best appreciate the achievement here, think of the last online FPS of *TF*'s nature to visually justify its barbarians in gang-colored clothing with anything other than "outer-space blood sport." I'm drawing a big fat blank, *Shadowrun* included.)

• **If *Counter-Strike* and *Day of Defeat* (Valve's other online FPSes) are any indication, more *Team Fortress 2* maps are on the way.**

Before day one, I understood the wisdom in nixing frag grenades. Throw 'em when you're near death, throw 'em anywhere anyone's likely to be—they were always the stuff of wasteful carpet bombing as often as they were tactical aids. But by day three or four, even caltrops and concussion, nail, and electromagnetic-pulse grenades no longer seemed as necessary. Valve's rebalancing and outright revamping of key classes works; each actor in *TF2*'s cast of nine owns his role with less overlap than ever. The football-like match flow is intact, too—Heavy Weapons Guys and Soldiers wrestle at congested lines of scrimmage; now and then Scouts and Spies slither through for Hail Marys (expressive in-game taunts substitute for high steps). And the metaphor stretches further: *TF2*'s maps are tailor-made for CTF, Control Point, or Attack and Defend modes. In other words, no baseball on the gridiron, no football on the diamond (see *Call of Duty*, *Halo*).

I can't hold truck with critical hits yet, but honest to god, I'm Alt-Tabbing back in the second I finish this sentence. • **Shawn Elliott**

VERDICT

- **Compulsively playable; world-class art direction.**
- **Too few maps (although more are on the way, gratis).**

9/10 EXCELLENT

Games for Windows

Episode Two integrates all information organically and in-game, maps included.

EPISODE TWO WAGS A FINGER AT FPSES WITH PAC-MAN MENTALITY

Half-Life 2: Episode Two's cast acts on stage, not in cutscenes.

If one (and only one) scene stalls, it's the antlion Alamo shown here.

HALF-LIFE 2: EPISODE TWO

Magnificent

PUBLISHER: Valve Software/Electronic Arts DEVELOPER: Valve Software GENRE: First-Person Shooter AVAILABILITY: Retail, E-tail (www.steampowered.com) ESRB RATING: Teen
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 1.7GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 10GB hard drive space, internet connection MULTIPLAYER: None VERSION REVIEWED: Xbox 360 Unobtainable

• **Enemy mine:** ***Half-Life 2: Episode Two*** **excavates an antlion larder.**

REVIEW

EDITORS' CHOICE for Windows

Whether in magazines or on message boards, "cinematic" is the game critics' weasel word. Sometimes we say it when we aren't sure what we want to say. Usually, I understand it to mean specific moments when games aren't gamelike—when they stop showing, so to speak, and start telling, and when actors turn into audience. Why the word isn't pejorative when used this way probably involves movie envy and mistaken goose-and-gander assumptions about standard practice in one medium suiting the next. Nonetheless, videogames learn lots from other media, and by imitating the everyday function of film techniques instead of their exact form, *Half-Life 2: Episode Two* becomes movielike, but isn't a game that wants to be what it's not.

"Episodic" is a punchline to an inside joke, meaningful in that it pertains to Valve's ability to produce series segments at annual intervals rather than the periods of five or more years between its proper sequels. And *Half-Life 2* episodes aren't as long as retail games; give them that. The original analogy between short serial games and familiar formats invoked TV seasons in all the ways you'd expect. That comparison, too, is as apt as it isn't, because games—with their obligation to deliver playtime in double-digit hours—already resemble *Lost*'s sleepiest midseason weeks. In that respect, Valve's three-parter is akin to feature films where the question is "So can we sacrifice that to the cutting room?" and not "How can we stretch this with the season finale so far off?"

FLUFF-FREE

Filler-free to an even greater extent than *One, Episode Two* wags a finger at FPSes with *Pac-Man* mentality—the maze and its color changes, but the "dot eating" doesn't—at backtracking and at levels revealingly named "Once more, with feeling" (see: *Halo 2*). I'll address the exception now: Early on, one overly long tussle iterates on the *HL2* sequence that pit players and automated turrets against charging Combine in Nova Prospekt prison. Here, first-timers will see the challenge intensify in itsy-bitsy increments. I saw through it. That's it, though. Each and every 20 minutes thereafter, tone and tension vary, simmering and boiling and smoldering again across linked story beats very much *like those in a movie.*

Supersized physical puzzles—seesaw a broken and teetering bridge span so that you can boost your car up and over a chasm—give way to scenes from the zombie apocalypse, which grade into the laugh-out-loud dialogue of grunts debating who's had the harder time: those in City 17 or its White Forest fringe. *Episode Two*'s transitions dovetail invisibly. They embarrass FPSes that bounce players between firefights jury-rigged with the duct tape and bailing wire of rude cut-scenes. As a result, water cooler chitchat orbits moments, not missions; reference any scene and, as with movies, people recognize both it and its place in the bigger picture.

"Yeah, you improvise a human trebuchet from a grenade and an iron grate?" Char marks subtly suggest the solution to a brainteaser that other studios wouldn't dare ship without the confidence of an explanatory device. "Antlion soldiers and acid-vomiting workers fight zombies who also fight you and the Vortigaunt!" Valve frees *Half-Life*'s swelling menagerie in unruly three-way chicken fights. "I swear Alyx winked at me when I looked over. Later, her dad, Eli Vance, kidded us about the world's baby deficit before the self-important Dr. Magnusson stormed in." Because characters develop gradually, the problem isn't our indifference to the cast…but rather the risk that we'll expect to learn more about every incidental figure, such as Mag's charming lab-coated alien acolyte, in future episodes.

I've selected these examples at near-random to avoid spoiling truly standout showpieces. *Episode Two*'s entire five-hour experience—vivid, emotionally engaging, and virtually unsurpassed—is full of them. • **Shawn Elliott**

EDITOR'S NOTE

The requisite playtime for our reviews of *Half-Life 2: Episode Two* and *Portal* took place at Valve Software's Seattle, WA-based headquarters over a period of three consecutive days. Valve representatives sequestered our reviewer in an office, obligingly honoring requests for no disturbances, as he played both games—in their entirety—on a typical PC, custom-built to our very specific requests. We imagine most readers don't give a hoot about such circumstances, but we're saying it out here in the interest of full disclosure.

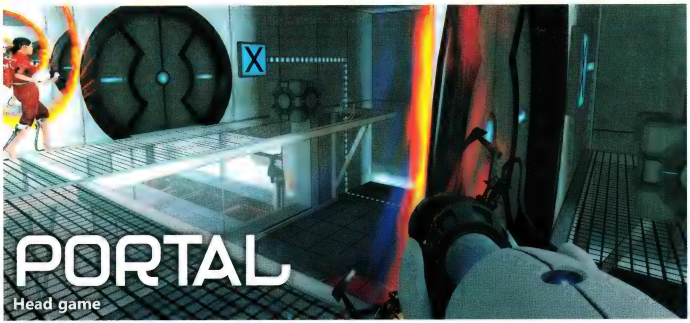
VERDICT

+ Exhilarating pacing; thoroughly enjoyable.

+ A single overly long action sequence; loading pauses.

10/10 EXCELLENT

Games for Windows



PORTAL

Head game

PUBLISHER: Valve Software/Electronic Arts DEVELOPER: Valve Software GENRE: First Person Puzzler AVAILABILITY: Retail, E-tail (www.steampowered.com) ESRB RATING: Teen MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 1.7GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 5.5GB hard drive space, Internet connection MULTIPLAYER: None VERSION REVIEWED: Near-Final Review Code

REVIEW

The firstborn commercial child

of game design–school grads (and obvious beneficiary of Valve's god-fathering), *Portal* was to be a value-added bonus, a puzzle anthology played from first-person perspective with the assistance of a gimmick too good to neglect—though perhaps impossible to integrate in games like, well, *Half-Life 2*. The Aperture Science Handheld Portal Device, an Acme-style doohickey and sister to the Zero-Point Energy Field Manipulator, generates wormholes. Left-clicking produces an entryway, right-clicking provides an exit, which means that anywhere in sight is also within reach. And provided the peg fits the hole, anything passes through—a description of level-design perdition (since developers want neither us nor items in their worlds ending up where they never intended) that accounts for *Portal*'s sparsely populated, antiseptic spaces. And that's fine, since nobody expects story from a spatial-reasoning exam. Only *Portal* does tell a tale—and this is its departure point.

"Who are we, and why are we here in this white-walled labyrinth?" At the outset, it isn't important. The Aperture gadget, dazzlingly different, distracts all attention, as does the fuzzy female voice that goads us on. Carry crates here, warp there—we do as we're told until the tasks turn lethal and "she" sounds more and more like *2001: A Space Odyssey*'s amok mainframe. At this point, one of many moving platforms malfunctions. What's behind its sanitized surface hints at the rabbit hole's true dimensions.

OPERANT CONDITIONING

The more intricate the rat maze, the more necessary the reward—part of *Portal*'s sinister genius lies in the cheese-crumb trail it leaves. Puzzle solving is an end in itself, and the game's Skinner boxes (note that, like the computer intelligence pulling our strings, Valve remotely tracks player progress, indirectly seeing what stumps us) are supremely entertaining to crack in on-again-off-again sessions. With the help of a narrative nicely tied to that of *Half-Life 2: Episode Two*, however, "now and again" becomes "nonstop, three-to-four-hour play-through" (but that's between you and Valve).

NOBODY EXPECTS STORY FROM A SPATIAL-REASONING EXAM.

Easy to spoil, the plot is also archly comic. Know that automated sentries, there to eviscerate test subjects who fail to upend them with portal improv, whisper sweet and oddly pitched "Marco"s to our suspicious "Polo"s. Know that the game's *PM*Sing HAL 9000 provides us with a Valentine's heart–tagged crate and calls it a "companion cube." Know that it orders players to incinerate the thing once we've used it to depress switchplates (a pun on the infamous 1960s Milgram social-psych experiment that showed people's readiness to perform acts that conflict with their personal conscience, provided an authority figure instructs it). Know that *Portal*, alongside *Episode Two*, proves the creative viability of games that are neither low-rent/casual/arcade nor costly all-or-nothing wagers in the monolithic triple-A market. But above all, know that we're being f***ed with in the best way. ● **Shawn Elliott**

VERDICT

- **Puzzles and plot harmonize perfectly.**
- **Devious puzzles might stymie some players.**

9/10

EXCELLENT

● ***Portal* includes several time-challenge puzzles distinct from the story proper.**

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• Here we see the massively destructible game engine caught in the act.

STRANGLEHOLD

Be not proud, Mr. Woo

PUBLISHER: Midway DEVELOPER: Midway Chicago GENRE: Third-Person Shooter AVAILABILITY: Retail ESRB RATING: Mature MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: Dual-core CPU, 2GB RAM, 15GB hard drive space, ATI Radeon X1300 or Nvidia GeForce 7800 videocard MULTIPLAYER: 2-6 players VERSION REVIEWED: Near-Final Retrievable

REVIEW

Hoo boy. If you're one of those folks who's morally opposed to the idea of porting games from consoles to PC, you're gonna want to stop reading now—continuing will only make you angry.

Are they gone? OK, look: This version of *Stranglehold* is a near-direct port of the Xbox 360 version. It's all but identical, and because of that, it's missing some of the necessities PC gamers take for granted. For example, you might notice that the minimum system requirements seem unusually high. That's probably because *Stranglehold* offers almost no video customization options, so you can't really dial back the system demands to let this thing run on older gear. But the odd thing is the lack of gamepad support: The game doesn't even support the wired 360 controller, which seems like a no-brainer—not to mention, it defies the logic of the aforementioned console-centric foibles.

BUST IT UP

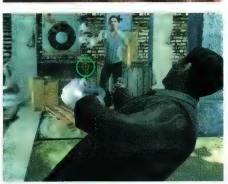
If you can suppress the feelings of righteous indignation prompted by the shamelessly skimpy nature of this port, *Stranglehold*'s a pretty good time while it lasts. This sort-of-sequel to director John Woo's seminal action flick *Hard Boiled* features a virtual Chow Yun-Fat reprising his role as Inspector "Tequila" Yuen, tearing things up in trademark dove-filled Woo fashion (no surprise there; Woo collaborated on the game). The ability to blast the living hell out of every environment is undeniably satisfying, a feeling that lasts longer than it has any right to—probably because you keep walking around thinking, "Can I destroy *that*? Why, yes! Yes I can! How about *that*? Why, yes!"

And Tequila's absurd gun-toting acrobatics are also plenty satisfying...when they work. This is one of the game's biggest problems: See, in order to interact with the environment—like by sliding down a banister, flopping on a rolling cart, or swinging from a chandelier—you first have to aim at an object and wait for the white glow that signifies it can be used. Trouble is, triggering these objects is frustratingly unreliable. Sometimes you're too close, sometimes you're too far away, and sometimes it *just won't work*. So *Stranglehold* often (not always, but often) loses its balletic potential when what should be a string of supercool slow-motion moves is broken by the finicky nature of the interactive objects.

WASN'T I JUST HERE?

The often-dull level design's also problematic. While certain areas stand out—an active demolition site is one shining example, as is the final level, set in a sprawling estate—many of the maps feel distressingly similar to one another. You could make the argument that the focus *should* be on the interactive and destructible objects within the levels rather than the level structures themselves, and I'd agree with you. Trouble is, the glitchy nature of the interactive objects means that you're not likely to exploit them, and thus the levels don't become the free-form playgrounds they were probably intended to be.

Stranglehold packs some impressive tech; the power to positively flatten nearly every object in a level offers a certain charm. And for the eight hours or so you'll spend playing through the story, it's reasonably entertaining. But with such unreliable environmental exploits, the game devolves into little more than a stylish, mindless, unusually destructive shooter. • **Joe Rybicki**



• Cart antics mean big style points.

VERDICT

6/10

AVERAGE

Games for Windows

+ Deliciously destructible environments, a moderately interesting story.

– Glitchy controls; too-similar levels make the game feel rushed and uninspired.

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Bet this German antitank crew wishes it had some uniforms with brown pants right about now.

Two Marder III tank-killers watch over my Panzergrenadiers as they repair a disabled armored car.

The Commonwealth's Canadian Artillery Regiment brings some serious pain from long range...

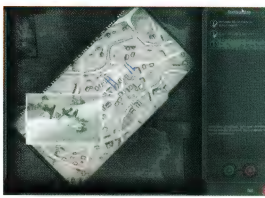
...which is perfect for blunting an infantry rush and sending Jerry into a state of disarray.

COMPANY OF HEROES: OPPOSING FRONTS

We don't oppose

PUBLISHER: THQ DEVELOPER: Relic Entertainment GENRE: Real-Time Strategy AVAILABILITY: Retail, E-tail (www.direct2drive.com) ESRB RATING: Mature
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 3GHz CPU, 1GB RAM (1GB for Windows Vista), 10GB hard drive space MULTIPLAYER: 2-8 players VERSION REVIEWED: Gold Master

REVIEW



• As in the original *COH*, missions are laid out History Channel–style, complete with *Madden*-esque telestrator swatches.

When subordinates asked him for a word of advice, Erwin Rommel commonly offered: "Never fight a battle you have nothing to gain by winning." Updated for us gamers, the Generalfeldmarschall's adage might run: "Never buy an expansion you have nothing to gain by installing." *Company of Heroes* was arguably the best game of 2006. Why slap an annex on the Taj Mahal, right? Well, with stand-alone add-on *Opposing Fronts*, developer Relic proves the old plastic surgeons' adage: Even perfection can benefit from the right kind of augmentations.

TOM AND JERRY

The first of these augmentations is *OF*'s two new playable factions: the Commonwealth (i.e., British/Canadians) and the semifictional Kampfgruppe Lehr Panzer Elite (SS Panzer Corps/Luftwaffe Paratroopers). Each new faction has a corresponding single-player campaign; the Brits struggle to seize the French town of Caen during Operation Goodwood, while the SS must prevent Operation Market Garden from punching through German defenses in Holland. Both campaigns feature the perfectly paced, subtly varied mission design that Relic is known for...but alas, both—like those in the original *COH*—end too quickly.

Of course, RTS games are as much about schooling scrubs as they are about new campaigns—and if you can find a multiplayer RTS you prefer to *OF*, you must work for Blizzard. Far from unbalancing the online game, the expansion's new factions add unique twists to multiplayer matches while leaving the classic, move-countermove tactical shifts untouched, which isn't to say the differences between the new factions and the original ones are minor. The Tommies, for example, focus primarily on the strength of their officers: Unlike other factions, their units don't level up with combat experience. But attach a veteran Lieutenant or Captain, and British infantry becomes tougher to break than a Lance Armstrong winning streak. Conversely, the Panzer Elite rely on versatility. Their basic infantry units are smaller and weaker than the other factions', but they can equip a wide range of gear, suitable for everything from tank-killing to sniping. Additionally, the SS soldiers deal out some serious whuppage in the form of their vehicles, including the Marder III tank destroyer and the imposing Tiger II tank. Truck up one of those bad boys in an online match, and the Allied players might as well start breaking out the Purple Hearts.

THE BAD AND THE BEAUTIFUL

New units, new maps, new campaigns—even *this* well-done—are all standard stuff. But *OF* takes expansion beyond merely piling new content on the old foundation. The whole game engine gets a face-lift, and now features real-time weather effects and day/night cycles. Additionally, fire and smoke now play a crucial role, alternatively illuminating and obscuring crucial views as you play. The result of all this: *COH*'s year-old Essence Engine is still the most beautiful, realistic RTS powerhouse on the market.

Like most beautiful things, though, *OF*'s improvements come at a price. The expansion is an even bigger system succubus than its parent, and the loading times are longer than the barrel of an 88mm flak gun. If you don't have at least 2GB of RAM or a multicore processor, you'll want to detune this particular engine. Plus, the literal price: *OF* runs you 40 simoleons—about twice as much as most other expansions. Yeah, it's a stand-alone...but if you bought *COH* a year ago, you'll feel like you just jumped in line with the early adopters of the iPhone. On the other hand, *OF* bears another characteristic of beautiful things: It's worth every penny. • **Eric Neigher**

VERDICT

- **Cleverly designed new armies; great multiplayer.**
- **Requires more muscle than a BALCO convention; $40 is a lot for even a stand-alone expansion.**

9/10 EXCELLENT

Games for Windows

RUNNING WITH THE DEVIL

Opposing Fronts addresses a common complaint against the original Company of Heroes—the lack of a German single-player campaign—by letting players take on the role of SS tank division commanders. But nowhere does *OF* mention what the SS is. Nowhere do we see a swastika or the SS runic lightning bolts or stenth's head. While Relic deserves credit for manning up more than, say, the *Call of Duty* series, it's troubling that the Nazis we control are largely "whitewashed." Maybe it's because THQ wants to sell the game in Germany (where Nazi symbology is strictly forbidden), but if you're giving a generation of kids a chance to "be" in the SS, you owe it to them (and to history) to make one thing clear: Every laudable act of courage and skill by the Germans meant more people liquidated in the camps. It may not be "fun" to remember such stuff when we're playing a game, but it's worth remembering, nevertheless.

● **Raptors: one of the most consistently annoying mobs in the whole of *Guild Wars*.**

GUILD WARS: EYE OF THE NORTH

Lazy eye

PLATFORMS: PC/Gulf DEVELOPER: ArenaNet GENRE: Action-RPG/RPG WEBSITE: ertail_3-1a3 (www.guildwars2.com) ESRB RATING: Teen
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 1GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 360 bar 2 drive space, any previous Guild Wars game MULTIPLAYER: Massive online MODDING POWERS: Retail Sec.

REVIEW

ArenaNet's *Guild Wars* series of free-to-play fantasy MMORPGs always marches to its own drumbeat—but these days, it sounds a little too much like something out of *Donkey Konga*. The tin-eared *Eye of the North* expansion marks the series' first entry that doesn't stand alone, instead sequelizing the original *Guild Wars: Prophecies* for veteran players. In other words, *GWEN* ain't for first-timers.

The acronym's a mildly clever reference to *Prophecies'* presumed-dead youngster (and mysterious plot device), Gwen, who's now all grown up...and still traumatized from the cataclysm that set the *Guild Wars* series in motion. She and nine other customizable hero NPCs join in your solemn mission to traipse across a handful of newly unlocked areas on the old *Prophecies* map, saving the world from yet another clichéd demonic incursion.

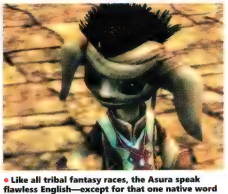
In a somewhat refreshing move, *GWEN* shuns *Guild Wars'* tiered reward structure in story-driven missions. Instead, multilevel dungeon instances populate the map, each yielding fixed experience point rewards—and move the plot forward with the speed of a runaway train. The fiction's initially divided into three separate paths (each exploring a particular plot thread), which eventually converge for a final string of high-end dungeon crawls. The problem: It's over before you know it. *GWEN's* easily finishable in a week-end of dedicated play; I'd (liberally) estimate the total campaign content at about 25 percent of the typical *Guild Wars* game. Suddenly, that $40 price tag (just $10 cheaper than usual) doesn't look like such a bargain, does it?

HE WHO HAS NO LIFE, WINS

Then again, if you dig repetition, *GWEN's* extra-curricular activities are perfect for you. While the game mercifully includes only 10 new (and easily bought) skills per class (for a total of 100 new class-specific skills), every side quest and minigame exists to encourage mindless grind, dangling faction-specific reputation rewards before you as a constant carrot. Want those cool class-neutral faction skills to work well? Want to buy new armor (in all its retextured-model glory)? Prepare to kill a whole lotta monsters to "earn" those privileges.

The Hall of Monuments—ostensibly a bridge between this game and the impending *Guild Wars 2*, where future characters can claim the titles and treasures preserved here—is the most egregious offender. It's an ill-conceptualized monument to inefficiency, allowing you to put only the most menial of your "accomplishments" on display: your elite armor (only if you grind for the platinum to buy it), favorite heroes (only if you repeatedly run challenge missions for their armor upgrades), weapons (only *GWEN* weapons, ensuring plenty of repetitive endgame "raiding"), and so on. Talk about fun!

This ties into one of the weirdest things about *GWEN*: It comes off as a hasty advertisement for *Guild Wars 2*. Some of the racial retcons (the obviously *Conan*-inspired Norn; friendly factions of *Guild Wars'* Minotaur-like Charr) fit comfortably into the existing fiction...while the impish Asura look (and sound) as if *Harry Potter's* Dobby, *Sam & Max's* Max, and a stereotypical Martian got into some sort of freak lab accident. Yes, we *know* the sequel's en route, *without* these incongruous elements shoehorned in. But hey—ArenaNet's making doubly sure we're aware of that, as *GWEN's* halfhearted presentation is an unmistakable plea for players to forget about this old game and focus on the future. ● **Ryan Scott**



● **Like all tribal fantasy races, the Asura speak flawless English—except for that one native word that essentially means "outsider."**

VERDICT

- **New hero NPCs; interesting deviation from the usual *Guild Wars* structure.**
- **Disarmingly insubstantial; lots of recycled art; Hall of Monuments is a sick joke.**

6/10

AVERAGE

Games for Windows

ULTIMA ONLINE: KINGDOM REBORN

Kingdom Euthanized

PUBLISHER: **Electronic Arts** DEVELOPER: **Electronic Arts** GENRE: **MMORPG** AVAILABILITY: **Free Download (www.uoherald.com/kingdomreborn)** ESRB RATING: **Teen**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **1GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 6GB hard drive space** MULTIPLAYER: **Massive-scale** VERSION REVIEWED: **Live v2.46.1.9**

REVIEW

You may find it shocking, but people still play *Ultima Online*...a full 10 years after its release helped kick off the MMO genre. The reason: *UO*'s original designers created it as a truly open virtual world. Nothing fosters player retention as effectively as an environment that lets you do just about anything you choose. The downside: all the crappy content that publisher Electronic Arts heaped into the game since then. Things like useless item statistics and out-of-place ninja skills pollute *UO*'s virtual world like trash on the banks of a stream.

EAs latest garbage pile, *UO: Kingdom Reborn*, is a buggy new client with 3D graphics that players can download for free. The updated graphics look decent (but still fall short of today's standards), and some mechanical changes constitute genuine improvements (such as finally being able to zoom the camera in and out). But the new client's main goal is to shoehorn in the same features you see in more recent MMOs—stuff like slot-based inventory management and the ubiquitous chat window in the lower-left corner. These additions simply cut the heart out of what makes *UO* so endearing: the immersion. Example: The old client's localized chat system meant you had to be within earshot of another player in order to communicate...whereas *Kingdom Reborn* jettisons it in favor of the impersonal instant messenger-style chat interface seen everywhere else. In *UO*'s case, these conveniences are the virtual equivalent of a sex change operation—a darkly amusing position for a game that offers player avatars that very option. ● **Matthew Chase**

EA'S LATEST GARBAGE PILE CONSISTS OF A BUGGY NEW GAME CLIENT WITH 3D GRAPHICS THAT PLAYERS CAN DOWNLOAD FOR FREE

● **From the beginning, *UO* offered one of the coolest MMO features ever: home ownership.**

VERDICT

- **Mechanical improvements; better visuals; you can still use the old client.**
- **Needless interface additions detract from the immersion factor.**

3/10

BAD

Games for Windows

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TWO WORLDS

Should've stuck with just the one world

PLATFORMS: Xbox 360, PC (reviewed) | DEVELOPER: Reality Pump | GENRE: RPG | AVAILABILITY: Retail | ESRB RATING: Mature
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 2GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 5GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard | MULTIPLAYER: 2-8 players | VERSION REVIEWED: Retail disc

REVIEW

Gargantuan game worlds are big in fantasy-RPGs. But bigger doesn't necessarily trump better, as evidenced by *Two Worlds*—a game doomed to endure countless unfavorable comparisons to *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* and regrettably too dependent on cliché and convention to qualify as unique in its own right. It's an admirable endeavor, but it's undone by its scope: Sprawling and overlong, it feels bloated rather than epic, with glimmers of brilliance insufficient to dispel the sense that developer Reality Pump bit off a bit too much.

LONG AGO, IN THE LAND OF BEEN THERE

Missing siblings, Orcs, imprisoned deities, magical artifacts cut into pieces and scattered across the land—*Two Worlds* is like a fantasy Mad Lib. You're a mercenary (male only...sorry, ladies) seeking his kidnapped sister and acting as the unwilling pawn in a saw-that-coming plot to resurrect the evil Orc god, Azziaal. As in other open-world games, you're free to follow or ignore this banal storyline, with its absurdly pompous Olde Englishe script and atrocious voice acting.

NPCs *prithee* and *forsooth* you into hundreds of inventive side quests, so players who elect to leave Sis to her fate still find themselves plenty busy in the extravagantly beautiful and monster-infested world of Antaloor. Given the priority of combat in *Two Worlds*, the developers blew the opportunity to make it great; it's clickcentric to the point of boredom. A few *Prince of Persia*–esque combos would help enliven the sadly unremarkable battle system.

Two Worlds does keep you entertained most of the time, thanks to some clever ideas like the *Voltron*-style ability to stack identical weapons and armor into more powerful wholes. When Ax plus Ax equals Better Ax, you have reason to gather even random corpse junk throughout the game. Collectible, interchangeable cards drive the magic system, encouraging customization with rare boosters that enhance the core spells of your growing deck. And easy teleportation makes globetrotting a snap without breaking up the flow as *Oblivion*'s fast travel did. You can even pay to "regress" your character—freeing up skill points earned when leveling, should you decide to change specialties or drop an unused talent. But every innovation is countered with something unnecessary or obtuse, from the deliberately clumsy inventory and interface to the pointless alchemy system to uncontrollable and exasperating mounts. Most irrelevant of all: two multiplayer modes, offering player-versus-player arena combat and limited party-based questing. These options are briefly entertaining, but the sparse online population and shallow amusement level render multiplayer a diversion at best. What it really demonstrates is how awesome a full-story cooperative mode would've been.

TWO MUCH

If you relish level grinding and clickalicious combat, you'll find enjoyment in *Two Worlds*—a couple hundred hours' worth of play for those willing to overlook small but numerous flaws. It's stable, attractive, and engaging enough to keep you coming back. But the game kitchen-sinks itself. Had the developers made it about 30 percent smaller, cut the fat, and tightened its assorted good qualities, they may have realized its true potential and produced something special. As is, nothing's intrinsically bad about *Two Worlds*—but neither is anything memorably good. **Matthew Sakey**

Well, of course you're cold—look what you're wearing.

In classic action-RPG tradition, you'll find yourself in major battles against multiple foes.

VERDICT

- **Gorgeous and action-packed; wide scope of activities.**
- **Size trumps substance; unnecessary multiplayer; frustrating interface.**

6/10 AVERAGE

Games for Windows

GALACTIC ASSAULT: PRISONER OF POWER

Captive of conventionality

PUBLISHER: Pseudex Interactive DEVELOPER: Wargaming.net GENRE: Turn-Based Strategy AVAILABILITY: Retail, E-tail (www.gamersgate.com) ESRB RATING: Teen
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 2.4GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, 2GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard MULTIPLAYER: 2 players VERSION REVIEWED: Gold Master

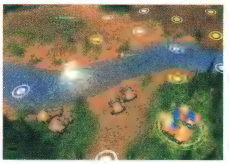
REVIEW

Designers need to learn that basing a game on a successful piece of literature doesn't automatically endow that game with a compelling story. *Galactic Assault: Prisoner of Power* touts its pedigree—Russian sci-fi novel *Prisoners of Power*—but fails to deliver anything more than a numbingly conventional plot and the Mr. Roboto voice acting we've come to expect from foreign titles. This is a double shame, because the original novel was a clever and courageous allegorical assault on the Soviet regime it was written under. Here, it's turned into so much videogame sci-fi grist.

Still, games aren't books, and while *Galactic Assault* stumbles on storytelling, it manages to pull its oar when it comes to the points and clicks. An easy-to-learn hex system governs all movement and combat, so nothing's ever more than a couple clicks away. And, while it plays on a 3D map and features some hallmarks of the RTS genre (base-building, unit upgrades), *Galactic Assault* is strictly turn-based. Sure, battles never quite reach *X-COM* tactical levels, but the missions are satisfyingly challenging, and they encourage you to take basic strategic factors such as cover, range, and opportunity fire into account.

OK, so the A.I. is kinda, sorta missing the "I" part, and the graphics are about as crisp as week-old cabbage, but *Galactic Assault* nevertheless cobbles together its remaining shards of quality into a respectable game. If you're a turn-based tactical buff, it's definitely worth a gander—just wait till the price comes down a few rubles. • **Eric Neigher**

WHILE *GALACTIC ASSAULT* STUMBLES ON STORYTELLING, IT PULLS ITS OAR WHEN IT COMES TO THE POINTS AND CLICKS.



• **The dots represent where this unit can move. Green is a cover bonus, yellow is normal, and white means extended movement because of a bonus.**

VERDICT

- **Gives you exactly what you'd expect from a tactical, turn-based game.**
- **Gives you only what you'd expect from a tactical, turn-based game.**

6/10
AVERAGE
Games for Windows THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE

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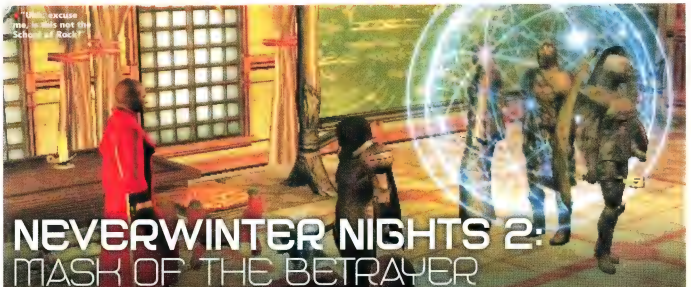


NEVERWINTER NIGHTS 2: MASK OF THE BETRAYER

The best *D&D* game in years—and it's an expansion

PUBLISHER Atari DEVELOPER Obsidian Entertainment GENRE Role-Playing Game AVAILABILITY Retail, E-tail (www.gfwl.com/) GAME RATING Teen
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS 2GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 5.5GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard, *Neverwinter Nights 2* MULTIPLAYER 2-6 players VERSION AVAILABLE Retail Version

REVIEW

Can you go home again? And if so, how much will you—or your home—have changed since you left? That's one of *Neverwinter Nights 2: Mask of the Betrayer*'s themes, but it's also a question for beleaguered *D&D* fans desperate for the original *NWN2*, only to discover a virtual plague of bugs and camera problems rendering it all but unplayable. The good news: One year and 250 megabytes worth of patches later, the game is finally as good as promised. The better news: The new *Mask of the Betrayer* expansion is a stronger, more complex, and ultimately more satisfying game.

It's also not easy. Set soon after the original game's end, *Mask* begins with your character—you can keep your old guy or create one from scratch—at level 18 (or up to 20 if you were there already). The expansion adds two new base classes, Favored Soul and Spirit Shaman, and five new prestige classes, which, of course, you may be dying to try, but since you start at such a high level, it's kinda like buying an MMO character off eBay. Yes, your character is powerful from the start, but good luck knowing what you're doing. Fortunately, you can start the new classes from level 1 in the original *NWN2* campaign, if you'd like to learn the mechanics on an easier level.

Me, I chose to import my trusty level 18 Dwarf Paladin, Doofaeus Moronico—and had my best *D&D* RPG experience since Black Isle's 1999 masterpiece, *Planescape: Torment* (though it's *not* in the same league). *Planescape* is, in fact, the best point of reference here for describing *Mask*'s campaign. Rather than sending you on a save-the-world quest, *Mask* focuses on an inward journey: You awake imprisoned underground for reasons unknown, and you soon find yourself victim of a horrific curse. You spend the bulk of the game hopping through portals into surreal planes and dreamscapes in search of who put this curse on you, why, and how to get rid of it.

The curse is no mere plot device; it has a direct effect on gameplay. You've become a spirit-eater and must constantly consume spirits to stay alive. It adds a challenging monkey wrench to an already complex game—forcing you to reconsider even basic actions like resting or traveling, if your spirit meter is too low. Add in a few genuinely tough logic puzzles (some frustratingly short on clues) and a series of side quests that completely vary (some might not even open up) depending on your party makeup, and you have a game that goes a good 20 hours—at least—and begs for repeated playthroughs.

Mask is not without problems, though. Even all these patches later, with two new "modes" to play in, *NWN2*'s *still* got one of the most annoying, impossible-to-use cameras ever. (Obsidian: Please ditch this engine, for all our sakes, next time out.) The new NPCs are a fine, but mostly humorless, bunch. And once again, a few bugs tripped up my game, failing to trigger events and forcing me back to an old save (save early and often, kids). Still, these issues were *far* less obtrusive this time and ultimately did not dampen my happy feelings that here was the kind of deep, hardcore RPG that old-school fans like me thought they just didn't make anymore. ● **Jeff Green**

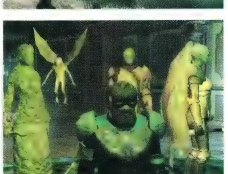
VERDICT

- **Good story; challenging; lots of replayability.**
- **Still some camera problems and quest-borking bugs; some puzzles lack ample clues.**

8/10

GOOD

Games for Windows



● **These sad *D&D*ers miss their buddy Khelgar.**

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RACE 07: THE OFFICIAL WTCC GAME

Proudly carrying the simulation torch

PUBLISHER: Viva Media DEVELOPER: SimBin Studios GENRE: Racing AVAILABILITY: Retail, E-tail (www.steamponered.com) RATING: Everyone MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 1.7GHz CPU, 128MB RAM, 2.5GB hard drive space, 256MB videocard (driving wheel recommended) MULTIPLAYER: 2-25 players VERSION REVIEWED: Final Pre-Release

REVIEW

Sad truth: The hardcore PC racing-sim scene isn't what it once was. Luckily for those who appreciate such games—where the sensation of driving a real car is paramount over off-track flash, where four-wheel drifts don't send you into the next continent, and where force feedback is indeed all it should be—a little Swedish company called SimBin carries the torch. Picking up where pioneers such as Geoff Crammond (*World Circuit*) and Papyrus Design Group (*NASCAR Racing*) left off, SimBin's kept the sim faith alive with highly regarded games such as *GTR 2*. In its latest, *Race 07: The Official WTCC Game*, SimBin goes crazy...but in a good way.

Race 07 is a *massive* affair, encompassing over 300 real-life cars spanning no less than nine real-life classes. From the race-prepped BMW and Alfa Romeo sedans in the 2006 *and* the 2007 World Touring Car Championships to the scorching open-wheeled monsters of the Formula 3000 series, the retro-cool Caterham Seven sports cars, and skittish throwbacks from the 1987 WTCC, this game pimps no shortage of rides.

TWO GAMES IN ONE?

More impressive than the sheer number is the distinctive, complex, and credible physics model attached to each. The folks at SimBin don't merely make a heavier car feel heavier or a faster car faster; they dig deep into the subtle nuances and come up with a wholly unique experience so convincing that they could've built a couple of games instead of one. And no matter what your level of experience, *Race 07* cars are a pleasure to drive. For racing newbies and immigrants from arcade-style titles, the game offers so many drivers' aids that the only question is which to deactivate. But if you're a sim veteran, you'll likely find no better test of your mettle.

With all aids removed, the cars demand all of your attention all of the time—and react agreeably only if you're skilled, experienced, and silky smooth. However, unlike other notable sims from the past—Papyrus' *NASCAR*, for one, where the journey from oval to road course was like a descent into hell—they don't feel *artificially* challenging. Ultimately, these cars probably drive more like real cars than those in any other game.

ARTIFICIALLY MORONIC

The A.I. drivers are another story: Though they smartly avoid collisions with you and struggle with traction just like humans do, they consistently beat the crap out of each other in the first few turns of a race. Thusly, two or three localized yellows—and delays—accompany the start of every event. But that's what patches are for. Furthermore, the game's sophisticated online multiplayer mode feels remarkably smooth, even with a dozen cars battling it out.

The game's track lineup is superb, whizzing you around the globe to 17 intriguing circuits (32 with variants), including several—such as Southeast Asia's Macau and France's Pau—that have purportedly never before been replicated. The look is photorealistic, right on down to the bugs on your visor and the smoke puffs from your motor. You will, however, encounter stuttering if you aren't equipped with a top-of-the-line videocard.

This is likely where Papyrus would be, had the company survived—and that says a ton.

• **Gord Goble**

• **Like SimBin's other games, *Race 07* is about as close as a videogame gets to real racing.**

VERDICT

8/10

GOOD

- **Superb physics models; impressive force feedback response; enough diversity for *two* games.**
- **Some A.I. quirks; high- and videocard mandatory.**

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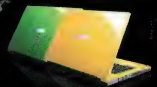

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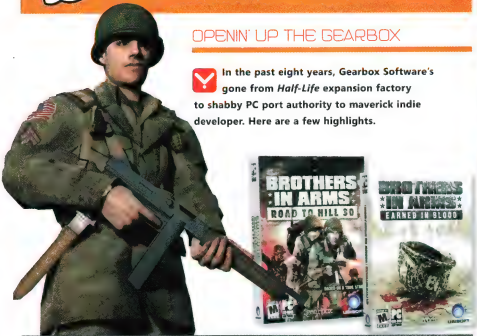
OPENIN' UP THE GEARBOX

In the past eight years, Gearbox Software's gone from *Half-Life* expansion factory to shabby PC port authority to maverick indie developer. Here are a few highlights.



BROTHERS IN ARMS: ROAD TO HILL 30/EARNED IN BLOOD

Sick of *Call of Duty* and *Medal of Honor* portraying the Last Good War as some sort of Steve McQueen balls-to-the-wall splatterfest? Looking for a first-person shooter that taxes your brain as much as your mouse hand? Look no further than *Brothers in Arms: Road to Hill 30*. Meticulously researched (the designers even flew out to Normandy to make sure their maps were historically accurate), *BIA* places you in command of a squad of American paratroopers at the outset of the Normandy invasion. You face off against some of the best A.I. in the algorithm business, but you'll get through so long as you employ the game's all-important 4F strategy: Find the enemy. Fix him with suppressing fire. Flank him. and Finish him (*Mortal Kombat* voice optional). Continue your swastika-swatting activities with *BIA*'s sequel, *Earned in Blood*, which features the same top-notch gameplay, paired with even tougher enemy A.I. and less-linear map design.

HALF-LIFE: OPPOSING FORCE

This first *Half-Life* expansion doubled as Gearbox's premiere game. *Opposing Force* presents an alternate-viewpoint scenario, sending players back to the Black Mesa Research Facility as U.S. Marine Corporal Adrian Shephard, one of the soldiers on hand to hide evidence of the incidents occurring there. Much like a hapless *Lost* character, Cpl. Shephard has a handful of brushes with the original *Half-Life*'s events, including a few glimpses of series protagonist Gordon Freeman. Like all things *Half-Life*, it's still available on Steam—and still worth playing.

HALF-LIFE: BLUE SHIFT

Half-Life's second expansion offers another alternative perspective: that of beer-happy Black Mesa security officer Barney Calhoun, who races to find an escape route from the facility before a group of Marines massacre its personnel as a cover-up precaution. *Blue Shift*'s not quite as cool as *Opposing Force* (it's much shorter, with very little "new" content), but hey—it's *Half-Life*. The version available on Steam suffers from a few technical problems, but the guys at *Half-Life* Improvement Team (www.hl-improvement.com) have 'em licked with fan mod *Blue Shift: Unlocked*.

HALO: COMBAT EVOLVED

This is mostly here just to show how far Gearbox has come. For a year or so, the developer focused on porting console titles to PC (see also: *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 3* and *007: Nightfire*)—and *Halo*'s the best of the bunch. In what's since become a normal occurrence for the *Halo* series, it wound up on PCs a full two years after its Xbox debut, fueling our conspiracy theory that Microsoft's happy to delay *Halo* PC ports until no one's likely to care about them. The reason: Toe-to-toe against sophisticated PC shooters, Microsoft's flagship console franchise is a paper tiger.

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Game names in yellow indicate *GFW* Editors' Choice award winners

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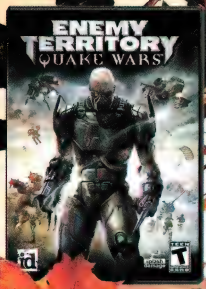

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REVIEWS WRAP-UP

The games that were too late (or too lame) to review in this issue

SPIDER-MAN: FRIEND OR FOE

PUBLISHER: **Activision** DEVELOPER: **Beenox** GENRE: **Action** AVAILABILITY: **Retail** ESRB RATING: **Everyone 10+** MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **1.6GHz CPU, 256MB RAM (1GB in Windows Vista), 5.5GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **2 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Near-Final Reviewable**

This jaunty little romp into the *Spider-Man* universe sees the Wall Crawler and Friends™ (including Blade and Black Cat) beating the tar out of utterly generic Bad Guys™ in order to save the world from Some Horrible Fate™. Yeah, it ain't exactly Alan Moore, but the inclusion of true co-op gameplay and character customization, à la *Marvel: Ultimate Alliance*, takes *Friend or Foe* beyond the bounds of basic beat-em-up bleh. If you've got a couple good gamepads, a friend of some sort, and a taste for Stan Lee–esque one-liners, *Friend or Foe* ought to satisfy your Spidey sense.

DUCATI WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP

PUBLISHER: **Strategy First** DEVELOPER: **Artematica** GENRE: **Racing** AVAILABILITY: **Retail, E-tail (www.steampowered.com)** ESRB RATING: **Everyone** MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **1.6GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 4GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **2 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Near-Final Reviewable**

From the same country that gave us the Ducati and the Vatican comes a game about the former that indisputably proves not all things Italian deserve pontification. Artematica's *Ducati World Championship* offers a variety of racing modes, nifty time-of-day and weather effects, and a whole whack of classic and current Ducati motorcycles. But that's where the fun stops: The game's menu system is clunky and aurally abrasive, its environments are sparse and indistinct, and its physics model is so absurdly archaic that you'll pine for the decrepit coin-op racers down at the local bowl-o-rama. An imperceptible sensation of speed only adds to the misery, and the dentist-drill engine notes are the final nail in the coffin—which is precisely where *Ducati* should stay.

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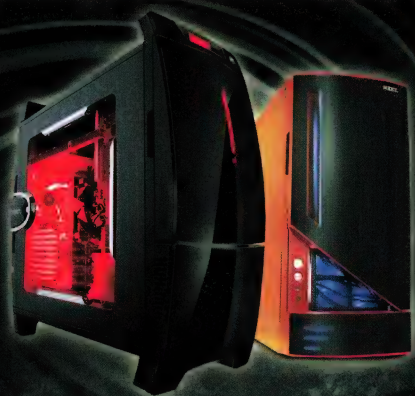

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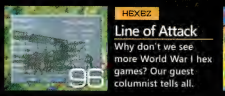

HEXEZ
Line of Attack
Why don't we see more World War I hex games? Our guest columnist tells all.

WEBOZ
Falling Pieces
Word games and PopCap casual deals abound this month.

PLAYER vs. PLAYER

Two gamers enter. No gamer wins.

FORTRESS FOREVER

Welcome to Hell's Hallway

BASE GAME **Half-Life 2/Source Engine** DEVELOPER **Fortress Forever Team** GENRE **Online First-Person Shooter** URL **www.fortress-forever.com**

● **Hell's Hallway: Rory traps public players in their own spawn; Shawn shows the captive audience miscellaneous murals.**

COLUMN

Shawn Elliott

Shawn edits *Games for Windows: The Official Magazine*'s Start section.

Rory Manion

Rory freelances for *GFW* and has been arguing with Shawn in TeamSpeak and various IM clients for five years.

While regular columnists Tom Chick and Bruce Geryk take the month off, *GFW*'s resident bad seeds, Shawn Elliott and Rory Manion, fill in. The game: Source mod and *Team Fortress Classic* remake *Fortress Forever*. Shawn plays for Red team; Rory plays for Blue.

SHAWN: Push is pretty much a reverse flag-capture map. The object is to carry a soccer ball from the middle of the map into the opposing team's backfield capture zone. I think it's a soccer ball...not because the mode is similar to soccer, but because—like swap-meet shoppers—online games are more inclined to take flags home than to plant them in conquered territory. Rory, for instance, scored a Metallica *Ride the Lightning* flag. And in my mind, it is a flag, although it also acts as a tablecloth insofar as the milk crates it covers are a table.

RORY: We can talk about my furniture after you fill me in on the requirements for dual citizenship in both the *Halo* and Raider Nations. Forget all that, though. My game just loaded, and I'm staring at a police lineup of grimacing, muddy-faced G.I. Joes.

SHAWN: The great thing about any *Team Fortress* game is that no matter what your tastes, there's a class tailor-fit for you. Like now I'm gonna go Engineer and jigger a space-age slow roaster: an orbital laser that can cook any target I paint with BBQ sauce. OK, I'm exaggerating, but if you're wearing fingerless gloves and enjoy holding down a button while waving a mouse like it's a dowsing rod, you'll swear the Heavy Weapons Guy was made with you especially in mind!

RORY: Tom vs. Bruce fans won't find that funny.

SHAWN: Yeah, well Diocletian isn't a class, is he? Speaking of which, I have a new spray tag to show you. It's a dragon and a '70 Camaro. His wing dang doodle is deep in the tailpipe. This is where HW Guys come from, I think.

RORY: My Big Dawgs T-shirt says Heavy Weapons Guy, but my wall scrolls are all Spy. In *Team Fortress Classic*, the Spy was a class that required finesse and know-how; in *FF*, it's an invisible nuisance machine for melee-minded twits who think a knife to the back is the epitome of skill.

SHAWN: His shiv isn't Hattori Hanzō steel. Still, he looks like the type of person who posts on forums about how two samurai and one ninja are more than a match for America's armed forces. In short, he's yin to your kanji tattoo's yang. Really, I saw this coming when you insisted on trying my science pork with chopsticks.

OK, the invisibility is overkill. Your damn tranquilizer dart is useful enough. I'm hobbled, my screen is simulating malarial side effects, and you're here to stab me out of my misery. Some of *Fortress Forever*'s tweaks on *TFC*'s formula are god-awful, however well-intentioned. Instead of warming up his Gatling gun, the HW Guy has to worry about it overheating. All he has to do, though, is tap the trigger, and he becomes a turret with a broken metabolism.

RORY: I wonder who still doubts the wisdom of Valve's decision to ax certain *TFC* mechanics in *Team Fortress 2*. The Medic's power to infect enemy players, for instance, sounds fine until you spawn into what looks (and sounds) like a *Fortress Forever* STD clinic. If the sputtering of infected players doesn't convince you, the dozen cluster frags blowing up outside your base should.

SHAWN: Conspiracy theory: Valve dropped this to justify its *TF2* design decisions. Joking aside, this is a win-win season for *Fortress* fans. When you want something closer to the classic, complete with trick jumping and split-millisecond timing, you have *FF*. When you're tired of the fireworks factory, you have *TF2*. >

The trouble with this server is that it supports 20-some players when it ought to have 10. And look how dumb we are, doing the "versus" thing in a team-based game. Join Red team—I have an idea.

RORY AND SHAWN VS. REASON

SHAWN: OK, run interference when I get the ball and go backfield.

RORY: Operation Take the Ball and Go Home? Tom vs. Bruce fans won't find that funny.

SHAWN: Yeah, but Plutarch isn't a ball, is he? And yup, the word for this is "griefing." We'll slap a "stunts performed on closed course" warning on the screenshots, though.

RORY: The idea is so simple that I'm surprised it works: One player swipes the ball; the other acts as doorman back at base. In Push, spawn doors open only from the inside—this prevents opposing players from harassing you before you're aware of what's happening, and I suppose it should prevent people from doing what we're about to do. Whatever. I stand in the doorway, and Shawn squeezes in. Instant stalemate. If anyone asks, I'll them we're LARPing a pro-flag spokesman attempting to prove that soccer balls are inferior capturables.

Hang on. I'm about to Alt-Tab out and find a spray tag for this.

SHAWN: Make the tag. I'll argue that the *Fortress Forever* mod crew swiped the idea of Red and Blue teams from *Halo* and say I'm staying in our spawn area until I see a satisfactory answer.

RORY: The spray tag should not only demonstrate our deep commitment to ball-hoarding, but also express contempt toward those who seek to relieve us of our ball. I think I have just the thing—it's subtle, but also quite poignant and profound.

SHAWN: So subtle, in fact, that neither team seems to notice our masterstroke. Go Engineer and build a sentry gun to block one exit and an ammo dispenser to jam the other. This will create the captive audience that Operation Take the Ball and Go Home needs if it's to join Operation Karansebes in martial history's hamper. More importantly, Red team is now more or less locked in a public toilet, looking at what I've scribbled inside the stalls (see: dragon and Camaro, wing dang doodle deep in the tailpipe).

RORY: The wretched denizens of what we now call Hell's Hallway weep and gnash teeth over VOIP. Actually it's just one guy muttering profanities into his microphone, but I need imagined grandiosity to distract me from the pettiness of what we're doing.

SHAWN: Petty? We're providing a valuable service. *Fortress Forever*'s modders now know to hotfix the map so that the ball stays outside spawns and Engineers can't construct in bottle-necked areas.

RORY: Fair enough, but our VOIP blathering has pissed off friendlies to the point that anyone who breaks our blockade immediately rushes to open the floodgates for the gathering masses of enemy players outside. In fact, I think I hear the sickly grunts of infected players heading our way now. They've resorted to germ warfare.

SHAWN: But VOIP blathering is intended to pacify irate players. I mean, I'm asking Bozone what his favorite room in Graceland is, and which Elvis songs he thinks the HW Guy enjoys, and whether or not I should eat on the Franklin Mint commemorative plates I currently have hanging on my bedroom and bathroom walls, and...all of it is static-saturated nonsense in the guise of a human voice.

In *Fortress Forever*, same as in *Team Fortress Classic*, Medics inject opposing players with a communicable life-leeching infection, and our one-time teammates are bringing back the bug like soldiers on home leave. Now and then, a damn Medic weasels inside, but we're able to shoot him dead. Rory, however, has to sacrifice his sentry and spawn in as an ally Medic to cure me of...whatever it is I've contracted.

Valve chopped the viral mechanic from *Team Fortress 2*, claiming that the last thing they wanted was for people to fear the very teammates they ought to work with. I'm not sure what sense to make of that, seeing how having Spies in the game guarantees that exact outcome. And at least you can tell an infected ally from one with a clean bill of health by his porno-flick huffing and puffing and the malarial cloud hanging over his head.

RORY: In *Fortress Forever*, proximity is the mother of infection—and with both teams crowding on either side of a single doorway like *Dawn of the Dead* rejects, there's only one thing for any decent griefer to do. After spawning as a Medic and stanching Shawn's health-point drip, I buzz out of our base like a West Nile–carrying mosquito. It's a suicide mission, but the concussion grenades I dump the instant I hit the door stagger the enemy long enough for me to get in close with my infect-o-box. Luckily for me, while Medics in *Fortress Forever* compulsively infect enemy players, they're disinclined to heal friendlies. My score skyrockets right alongside the server's collective blood pressure.

SHAWN: *FF* is the perfect partner for *Team Fortress 2*, and for that I'm thankful. When we want hyperactive trick jumping and tradition, there's the one; when we want the future, there's the other.

So about your score: They count in our favor against the rest of the server? Or are we playing for achievements? Ghost Town: You successfully emptied a public server.

RORY: We could come up with a score-to-rage ratio to determine just how fully we've wrecked this match, but I'd say our victory is assured: score be damned. All we need to do now is continue our pro-bag proselytizing until the timer ticks to nothing. Besides, furious teammates have me backed into a corner, and they're impotently wailing on me with melee weapons.

SHAWN: I'm starting to feel like the bully who swipes some little kid's ball and stands there laughing until it's unbearably awkward and he finally drops the ball, says a naughty word, and walks away.

RORY: I thought this was a "valuable service" to the *FF* team. Don't tell me the True Believer is cracking under the pressure. Come on, our He-Man Blue Haters tree house is secure, and the capture score is still 0-0, with only three minutes left on the clock. What could we possibly do as atonement?

SHAWN: You little rascal. It's your turn to write now.

RORY: What is that, a two-sentence "welp?"

SHAWN: Welp, you made a *Little Rascals* joke. Am I supposed to be happy about it? Give me more Paracelsus.

RORY: You could at least show some respect for my knowledge of obscure references. Screw it, I'm dropping grenades at my feet—gonna go out with a bang. Or are puns taboo too? God, I wish friendly fire were on.

SHAWN: That's what "Operation Karansebes" alludes to, actually: 18th century team-killing. I searched Wikipedia for "self diagnosis + developmental delay." But then the dead don't argue. Doesn't this make me last man standing?

RORY: Welp.●

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CRISIS ON INFINITE

Trekking across the vast MMORPG landscape

Albatross18: Realms of Pangya: Golf *used* to be the only acceptable fashion weirdness for men. Not anymore.

Some things should just be left to the imagination.

THIS MONTH: IS THAT A GNOME IN YOUR CLOSET?

COLUMN

Cindy Yans

Cindy is a consultant for the Warrior and Druid lingerie sections of Macy's, Bloomingdale's, and Saks Fifth Avenue

Thun'grim Firegaze, an Orc blacksmith of renown, says: "I have heard tales of your strength and valor and wish to make for you a suit of armor, a companion to aid you as tales of your great deeds grow. But the fashioning of this armor will be a quest unto itself, <Your Name Here>.... Here, take this scroll. I spent many nights, struggling with near-blind eyes, writing that which I need for the armor. Bring me the items on this scroll, and I will create for you the first piece of the suit."

"Like hell. He said, 'near-blind eyes'? He must be joking. Do they really expect a visually challenged Orc to have any sense of fashion? What if he can't sew? What if the stuff is mauve? What if it has little yellow fishes all over it? How will I ever recover from the pointing and jeering of my guildmates? Huh? Huh? Did they ever think of *that*? 'Decline!'"

Good call. Besides...color and pattern aside, the deadly, treacherous, barbed spikes on the spaulders would simply *ruin* the entire silhouette. Just as you would never wear Capri pants, loafers, a do-rag, and a clip-on tie to the Cannes Film Festival (or *would* you?), you toss the notion of Firegazian-crafted armor right down the garbage disposal. It's too much of a risk. It would be too degrading for someone of your allure, class, elegance, and style.

BUT DOES IT MAKE ME LOOK FAT?

Nowadays, the risk of fashion faux pas is greatly diminished. As you may know, various degrees of try-before-you-buy functions are standard in several of the major MMOs—either officially included or modded in. Wardrobe, Dressing Room, ItemRack, and ClosetGnome are a few of them, and they've helped bunches of avatars save themselves from certain embarrassments like wearing parachute pants or pirate shirts, pairing fur coats with gear composed primarily of spandex, or exposing Night Elf panty lines (for more tips, see sidebar). It's a convenient form of wardrobe-malfunction insurance.

They essentially allow you to see the bottom-line "what if" when it comes to how your character will appear when considering any potential gear upgrades. L.P. Wodehouse of Portland, OR laments, "My female Paladin bought a set of green plate leggings from the auction house. On her avatar, though, you saw freaking purple thigh-high stockings and underwear—with lace!"

FrancoPrussian says, "I think the worst fashion mistake I've made was with my male Gnome Mage. I snapped up a cheap robe that was a big upgrade for me and happily wore it around Loch Modan. It wasn't until other characters pointed and laughed that I changed the camera view. There he was in a short brown kilt with one strap and a bare midriff. Some things should just never been seen on a Gnome! Like...don't undress them. Ever."

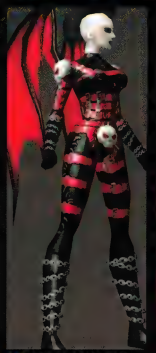
THINGS MIGHT GET EVEN UGLIER

Picture this: After a party spends six hours of camping the DunderSwine, the placeholders vanish and are replaced by the giant boar. The well-trained crew smites him in about 10 minutes. A record. And then it happens....

ImEight: The Weimaraner Sash of Certain Doom! OMGOMGOMGOMGOMG. I can't believe ti finally dropped. WOOOtt.
RaidLord: WAIT!!!! It's BOP, right?
ImEight: yah but its got +21 to ShowerStall.
NavelRing (*having linked to the sash with Dressing Room*): But it matches my lime green clubbing outfit! I'm rolling.
ImEight: NO. you can't. its +21 SHOWERSTALL.

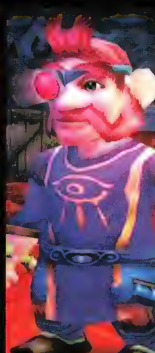
NOWADAYS, THE RISK OF FASHION FAUX PAS IS GREATLY DIMINISHED.

SERVERS



● *City of Heroes* and *City of Villains* are (mostly) all about the costumes.

● Who let this wolf cross-dress in public?



● Gnomes aren't goofy-looking—they're just misunderstood.

RaidLord: Um, you can both use it?
NavelRing: Damn skippy. Rolling....
TimGunn: WAIT! Navel, you should really think twice about wearing a belt that cinches your waist like that. It's all wrong for you.
NavelRing: ...
TimGunn: Seriously. Your anorexic character just looks, well, it's just NOT attractive.
ImEight: SHOWERSTALL.
RaidLord: Let's see...using the probabilistic DKP system....
NavelRing: Hey, even my mace goes good w/ it. Rolling.
TimGunn: But you'll look like a reject from *Undead Weekly*.
ImEight: Ur a greedy $&(@$. its minne. ShowerStall RULZ 4 clerics.
AltTank: Lets GO.
TimGunn: C'mon, Navel. Let him have it. I'll take you shopping at the auction house. Give the kid a break. He's EIGHT, for god's sake.
NavelRing: Teh auction house sucks.
ImEight: 8's not my AGE.
RaidLord: Ugh, don't even make me think about that.

Before the preview option, NavelRing would never have known how the belt would enhance his/her ensemble. It could've been the MMO gear equivalent of socks with sandals. TimGunn could've gone to work on his winter collection, Eight boy would've achieved +21 ShowerStall without a hitch, and RaidLord could've happily spent more time adjusting his...loot table.

SKEWED TWO WAYS

I asked a number of people about their biggest gear and fashion issues, and I got some classic responses that fell into two categories:

"I have 8/8 Nightslayer, 2/8 Bloodfang (bracers, helm), and 2/5 ZG set (bracers, shoulders). I am PVE sword spec and use 5/8 Nightslayer, BF hood, and ZG shoulders and bracers. The stats on the ZG bracers and shoulders are almost the same as their Nightslayer counterparts, but ZG gives you an extra 20 attack power. It's definitely worth it. For PVP, though, I usually wear 8/8 NS for the free vanish heal. I don't see myself getting rid of the ZG pieces until I want the 5/8 BF set bonus (if I decide to give up the 10 energy from 5/8 NS)."

Ahem. Okaaaaaay, and:

"I think I have my wardrobe issues figured out for the GM-sponsored Erollisi Fest this weekend. I need to balance grown-up sophistication with Goth, and practical with edgy. I can't really wear heels, though, can I? But I think I'll be OK. Black, lace-edged leggings under a finely crocheted cotton spiderwebby dress, all knee-length and narrow-fitting, with a very wide black leather corset belt. Black leggings and my over-the-knee pointy-toed—yet miraculously flat—leather boots. Just a little medieval in mood. But no fur. Fur is dead."

Well, *of course* it is, darling. ●

HOT FASHION TIPS

When thinking about a new MMOutfit, you should take a few dos and don'ts into consideration. Here are some of the most crucial ones:

1) Never wear Hubble-pleated greaves after Labor Day.
2) It's never in good taste to appear in town in a helm...
3) ...In fact, helms should always be worn, but not seen.
4) One size fits all—no matter how weird it looks.
5) Everyone looks really dumb in Gnome-crafted headgear.
6) You won't look gay in flowing purple...not that that'd be bad.
7) Moondoth pants actually do cover your butt.
8) Rings and necklaces go with everything.
9) Dead-animal hats go with nothing.
10) If it looks sharp, hot, or cold, it likely is sharp, hot, or cold.
11) The times the chain G-string, the higher the armor rating.
12) Bonus or no, fully matched gear sets are so last season.
13) If it doesn't wave, glow, flame, or protrude, it's a bad idea.
14) Voidwalkers and Succubi are hot fashion accessories.
15) Ogres should really reconsider wearing pins.

LINE OF ATTACK

Your monthly guide to hardcore war-gaming

COLUMN

Di Luo

Di spends his days locked in a windowless gray building writing book reports for the American military.

World War I was a clash of giants that killed millions, destroyed the optimism of liberal Europe, annihilated empires, and foreshadowed an even more destructive global conflict. Despite the importance of the war, it's usually considered too static and dull for a game.

Luckily for war gamers starving for something new, Matrix Games recently published *Frank Hunter's Guns of August: 1914-1918*, a strategic-level "we go" game covering the entire war. *GOA* sports considerable depth without getting bogged down by needless minutiae, and its scale is perfect—corps on land, squadrons at sea, and a smidgen of economics, diplomacy, and tech research. The strategic decision-making is relatively abstract and never inconsequential: Your resource-allocation choices influence the war months after you decide.

GOA SPORTS CONSIDERABLE DEPTH WITHOUT GETTING BOGGED DOWN BY NEEDLESS MINUTIAE.

Turns are divided into a strategic phase for the political and economic decisions and a series of action phases for moving troops and combat. Corps can only enter hostile territory and attack when activated by an HQ possessing large stockpiles of resources. This neat little mechanic limits the mobility of the ponderous armies and keeps *GOA* campaigns from turning into WWII-like blitzkriegs. Though fronts sometimes become static staring contests between gigantic armies, the game plays quickly enough that a few turns without a major offensive is more restful than boring.

It's a shame that the interface sucks and the A.I. is sometimes awful (it's utterly incapable of defending the Eastern Front as the Central Powers). I also have a few quibbles with the balance, like the underpowered trenches and overpowered artillery. The various powers also work together *too* well; you shouldn't be able to stack Austrians with Turks and have both armies activated by a Bulgarian HQ. Still, *GOA* is one of the most refreshing war games to come along in a while. It's a fast game with vast scope and a fascinating subject. ●

● **The Schlieffen Plan goes awry as Russian hordes pillage eastern Germany.**

FALLING PIECES

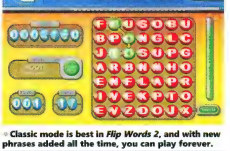
The best in casual games

COLUMN

Robert Coffey

Former *CGW* editor Robert Coffey now spends his days playing word games and block puzzles. What a life!

I play a lot of *Flip Words 2* these days, and I'm not quite sure why. On one hand, this bastard son of *Boggle* and *Hangman* offers some of the stiffer word-gaming challenges I've faced in some time. On the other hand, some of the answers—like "Zucchini and Summer Squash" or "Ten-Key Adding Machine"—are so far on the fringe of deductibility that it's maddening. The trick: Only the first letter of the words you build from the field is revealed, should it appear in the mystery phrase. It makes getting those crucial vowels tough, since the board is packed with consonants. You can earn extra turns (or buy vowels and hints in the less enjoyable Strategy Mode), but it's not easy. With new user-made phrases added all the time, this $20 title from Big Fish Games (www.bigfishgames.com) will keep you busy—and give you headaches—for some time.



● **Classic mode is best in *Flip Words 2*, and with new phrases added all the time, you can play forever.**

BUY NOW, PLAY LATER

Right now, PopCap's offering a great deal on 17 of its games, bundled for just $90. No, you won't get *Peggle Deluxe*, but the "Platinum Pack" includes *Bejeweled* and *Bejeweled 2*, *Rocket Mania*, *Zuma*, *Bookworm*, and *AstroPop*. Buying just those titles would run you more than $90 and cost you countless hours of otherwise productive time in your life. The Platinum Pack bargain includes a dozen more games, saves you about $240, and ensures you'll never achieve anything of value in your life. Ever.

And it's not even PopCap's best deal right now: The publisher's just released a free online-only version of *Peggle*. Even if you've already allowed *Peggle* to wreak its special havoc on your life, you might want to check this baby out, since it features 20 brand-new levels (though you can only play 10 at any time). All it costs you is your immortal soul. ●

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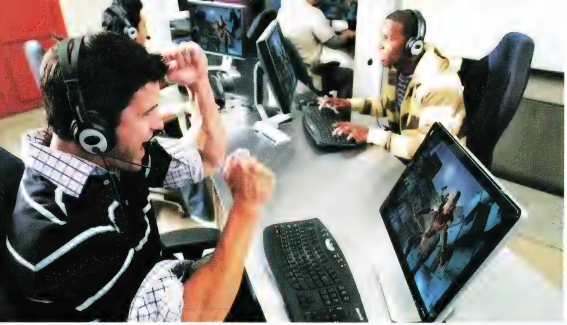


Making the Connection

Which reigns supreme for online gaming: console or PC?

Ask yourself which platform plays host to more online gamers: Windows® XP and Windows Vista® or videogame consoles like the Xbox 360™?

You'd probably say Windows, right? And rightly so—once you lay eyes on incredible multiplayer-friendly outings like **Crysis™** or **Universe at War: Earth Assault™**, you'll practically be drooling with anticipation. Sadly for console gamers, though, like all DirectX® 10 titles, they're Windows-only...and, as with most other broadband-ready favorites, best enjoyed on your PC.

Of course, these days, there's a lot of talk about gamers going online with their Xbox 360 and discovering a similarly satisfying experience to that found on computers. In fact, just recently, Microsoft announced that they now have 7 million Xbox LIVE® subscribers.

But savvy observers will note that it's not the first time consoles have attempted to make the jump to cyberspace, with efforts at interconnected online outreach dating all the way back to the '80s. However, in all previous cases, each failed to establish a large following among gamers, and these services were inevitably discontinued. Meanwhile, the number of players enjoying online games on the PC grew and grew.

As an example, consider the number of people playing Windows titles like **World of WarCraft®**, which now commands over 9 million subscribers—a population larger than that of New Zealand. You do the math: While having 7 million gamers actively playing on the Xbox 360 *is* impressive, a single PC title can boast more players than the world's largest online console network alone.

Windows further remains king with online gamers around the world because even enthusiasts with slow machines can play friends in thousands of older titles dating back over the past decade. In fact, giant communities of players are attracted to these games because they can use low-end computers at work and sneak in time online while on a coffee break.

Professional online gaming is most popular on the PC, too, as last month's article on the World Cyber Games illustrated. In other words, should you harbor dreams of becoming an online ace and winning piles of cash and prizes, you'll definitely find the most opportunities (and best competition) on Windows XP and Windows Vista.

As an extra perk, many online-enabled outings for Windows can also be modified to allow for entirely new game dynamics that just aren't available on consoles through the use of "mods," or homemade modifications. If you want to put the time in and turn a sci-fi blaster into a Western-themed shooter, go for it—anything's possible. If not, you can always browse through huge catalogs of mods created by other enthusiasts that are free to play and enjoy—the upshot being that the value offered by the PC is second to none.

In addition, unparalleled flexibility has always been a hallmark of online gaming on computers. But Microsoft has recently taken the concept one step further, letting PC and Xbox 360 owners sync up and simultaneously battle it out head-to-head over Games for Windows—LIVE in select titles. Not only can you finally play against console gamers to see which platform reigns supreme, but also discover an entirely new community of like-minded fans to tap into—a win-win situation for everyone.

Is it possible that online gaming might someday be more popular on a videogame console than on Windows? Certainly! But for now, consoles just don't offer the same variety and depth of titles that Windows offers today. Although, in fairness, going forward, it's more likely that various connectivity solutions will simply bridge the gap so that everyone will be able to enjoy favorite amusements over the Internet on their platform of choice.

I couldn't think of a better solution: Rather than divide the market into separate halves, services like Games for Windows—LIVE and Xbox LIVE already allow fans to game together. And, truthfully, that's what online play is really all about.

–Kevin J. Baird, www.videogamenews.com

Live and Ki

Games for Windows—LIVE continues to raise the bar for multiplayer connectivity

Groundbreaking. Innovative. The first, last, and only service PC online multiplayer enthusiasts will ever need. Whatever you choose to call critically acclaimed gaming and entertainment network Games for Windows—LIVE, a must-have for any Windows XP or Windows Vista™ user, just don't insinuate that it's a one-hit wonder.

As a continuous spate of fresh enhancements and additions (including all-new update v1.2) clearly illustrates, the service is just getting started. Already a favorite among interactive-entertainment buffs, the only platform capable of powering head-to-head showdowns between desktop users and Xbox 360™ owners in supported games continues to improve by leaps and bounds.

"Don't say we didn't warn you," says Chris Early, general manager of Games for Windows—LIVE. "As promised, this is just the first step toward realizing Microsoft's Live Anywhere vision of one unified gaming service, community, and vision across all platforms. Thousands of players already consider it a crown jewel, given the service's cutting-edge security and performance, and it continues to be a top priority going forward."

Already available in 25 countries from France to Norway to Taiwan, and over a dozen languages, Games for Windows—LIVE, a full-blown desktop-friendly realization of its award-winning cousin Xbox LIVE® and then some, keeps getting better.

Just a few of the many mind-blowing improvements recently added:

V1.1

- **Full support for Windows XP in addition to Windows Vista™**, meaning all Windows users can get in the game.
- **Support for DirectX® 10 graphics cards on Windows Vista**, ensuring Games for Windows®–branded blockbusters deliver the ultimate in immersive action straight out of the box.
- **12 new gamerpics**, so you can individualize your online experience.
- **Improved router interaction and error prevention**, promising maximum stability and user-friendliness.

V1.2

- **A more robust user front-end**, which can be used to upgrade your account from Silver to Gold or purchase Arcade titles on-demand directly inside games using Microsoft Points or a credit card.
- **The introduction of single-player and multiplayer Offline Achievements**, letting you score virtual badges of honor and increase your stature even when disconnected.
- **A revamped gamertag interface** that grants the ability to change identities without leaving the Guide.
- **Purchase once, play anywhere Arcade title options**, enabling the chance to download and play purchased Games for Windows—LIVE Arcade titles on any Windows PC where you have access to your LIVE profile. No repurchase necessary; just log in and enjoy.
- **See if friends' games are joinable**, for those seeking instant gratification.

"We've got hundreds of people working day and night to offer PC gamers a premium online experience," says Early. "Our philosophy has always been to bring over as many features of Xbox LIVE as fast as possible, while also adding as many PC-exclusive extras in as short a time as manageable."

"From free PC versus PC multiplayer to greater diagnostic capability, support for Windows XP and further empowerment of high-end game development, we're not only listening to fans' requests—we're responding," Early continues. "People ask us all the time for additions like Marketplace-style shopping solutions. You can bet that anywhere a big investment's been made on the Xbox 360 side, we'll be making an equally big one on Windows."

Better yet, as ever, you still don't have to pay a single cent to enjoy many of Games for Windows—LIVE's most compelling features. As Early explains, "You won't find greater value out there, especially at the bargain price of zero dollars and cents."

cking

Register for a complimentary Silver account, and you'll enjoy the following attractions:

- PC-ready multiplayer
- Personalized gamertag and gamer profile, or access to ones created on Xbox LIVE
- Single-player Achievements that contribute to a common gamerscore account across Games for Windows—LIVE and Xbox LIVE
- Private, 1-on-1 voice chat
- In-game voice chat during multiplayer matches
- Unified Friends List and online presence regardless of platform
- Access to massively multiplayer online games
- Send and receive text/voice messages
- All other Silver benefits on Xbox LIVE

Purchase a Gold membership for just $49.99/year, and you'll gain access to even more exciting features, such as:

- Cross-platform play with over 7 million Xbox LIVE members in select Games for Windows titles
- Multiplayer matchmaking with friends
- Enhanced matchmaking and feedback tools
- Ability to earn multiplayer Achievements
- Option to invite friends to join a game
- Chance to join friends' games in progress
- All other Gold benefits on Xbox LIVE

"Whichever level of subscription you choose, there's no going wrong," says Early. "That's because we're gamers here, too, first and foremost, and place huge importance on the value of feedback from our community. We've always done what we said we would: offer a unique online multiplayer platform that works as described, letting gamers jump right in and get straight down to business."

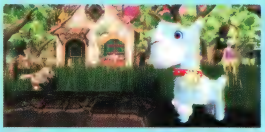
Don't expect the team to sit around and rest on their success, however. "Even greater things will come with time," says Early. "Right now though, we're just happy to say we're able to deliver a service that's left massive amounts of players around the world wholly satisfied."

EXTENDED PLAY

Get more from these top titles with Games for Windows—LIVE:

Gears of War® (Microsoft; Rated: M, Blood and Gore, Intense Violence, Strong Language)—Features the amazing tactical action and multiplayer excitement found in the critically acclaimed Xbox 360 videogame that sold more than 4 million units. Includes a variety of Games for Windows LIVE–ready features including three new multiplayer maps, a new multiplayer game type, Game Editor, five new campaign chapters, and DirectX® 10 support.

Kane & Lynch: Dead Men™ (Eidos, Rated: RP)—A gritty cinematic blaster starring a mismatched criminal duo that's got almost as much in common with Hollywood thrillers as high-end PC epics. Up to eight can admire the nail-biting action, which shines brightest in two-man co-op mode.



Viva Piñata® (Microsoft; Rated: E, Comic Mischief, Mild Cartoon Violence)—The colorful, kid-friendly smash—starring a customizable, vibrant world of living piñatas you can socialize and interact with—strikes back, letting you mix, mingle, or trade items with equally wide-eyed peers online. Games for Windows—LIVE ensures it's never the same experience twice!

Universe at War: Earth Assault (Sega, Rated: RP)—Flight Mastery. Whirling Dervish. Insignia of Corruption. Just a few of the many gameplay bonus–conveying Achievements you can unlock while hammering away at this futuristic, grand-scale real-time strategy opus pitting alien factions against each other for control of Earth.

Gears of War

Emerging on Games for Windows® this holiday season

Title: **Gears of War** • Publisher: **Microsoft Game Studios** • Developer: **Epic Games Inc.**
Format: **DVD-ROM for the Windows Vista® and Microsoft® Windows® XP operating systems**
Availability: **November 2007** • Price: **$49.95 ERP**

Frag-Filled New Content

Includes 5 new campaign chapters. Complete the full cinematic campaign individually or cooperatively online.

Features the All-New Game Editor, Guaranteeing New User-Generated Content in the Future

Channel your endless creative potential to develop an unlimited number of user-created levels through complete access to the Unreal Editor. Import custom artwork into the engine and create particle systems, scripted encounters, cinematics, and more.

New Multiplayer Maps and Multiplayer Game Mode

Tap into the power of Games for Windows—LIVE. The service will enable gamers around the world to connect via their PCs, allowing players to experience individualized matchmaking (Gold membership required), view player statistics, earn player Achievements, customize games, and create personalized profiles.

Astounding Visuals in Next-Generation Gaming

DirectX® 10 visual designs will bring out the smallest details in the largest battle. Gamers experience a rich, dynamic world with a supreme level of detail.

Get ready for Gears of War on Windows this holiday season!

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M
ESRB
Blood and Gore
Intense Violence
Strong Language

HALO 2

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7 HABITS OF EFFECTIVE

Tech tips to keep you at the top of your game

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EMBRACE YOUR NERD!

You can learn a lot of useful tricks from our wacky bevy of PC experts—and we're not just talking about how to keep your PC from overheating when you're playing Crysis on the lowest detail settings. Sometimes you just need to know how to get the most out of your hardware, or how to avoid a costly upgrade altogether. Maybe you're a hardcore gamer who's looking for that extra edge, or maybe you're a casual user who just wants to keep your PC from crashing. Whatever the case, we've got you covered. Here are 10 ways to get more out of your PC, from the simple to the sublime.

1 BATTERING RAM

Even IT experts goof on the basics, like, say, buying the wrong type of RAM for a PC. It's a big, costly, and sadly more common mistake than many would care to admit. RAM technology's always on the move, so a little bit of research before shopping can save you many headaches. Don't have the packing slip that came with your computer? Don't worry. Here are some low-impact ways to learn how your PC ticks without ripping out its innards:

- Download CPU-Z (www.cpuid.com). This handy freeware provides almost every detail about your components you could need.
- Check the Web. Sites like www.4allmemory.com run a browser-based system diagnostic that lists the exact RAM models that'll work on your PC—which they'll then conveniently sell you.

2 PICTURE-PERFECT

Videophiles know what to tweak when it comes to their picture. Your first instinct likely involves using your monitor's onscreen menu to change the brightness, contrast, or color hues. Hold up! Those hardware buttons should be your last resort. Always check your graphics card's control panel first (located in either the Windows notification area or control panel) to fine-tune colors and brightness. Still not 100 percent satisfied, you hardcore video freak? Pantone's huey (www.pantone.com) is a $100 piece of hardware that can read light sources and adjust settings for accurate colors on your monitor.

3 PATCHWORK

Before even playing a game, the diligent nerd knows to check for patches—because sure as hell, it's easier for publishers to ship a buggy game on time than a perfect one late. As sad as it is to expect patches, you need to look for hardware driver updates as well. With new games comes the need for obvious stuff like graphics cards patches, sure, but when was the last time you updated your motherboard? Your BIOS? Your audio codecs? It may not seem like much, but any number of things can drag down your system's performance. Fortunately, several options exist to keep your headaches to a minimum. The easiest one is Windows Update. It's on your computer for a reason—use it! Otherwise, freeware such as GameShadow (www.gameshadow.com) does all the legwork for you by fetching needed files. Also, don't forget to consult trusted tech sites such as The Guru of 3D (http://guru3d.com).

4 MAINTAIN YOUR GAME

Piles of aluminum cans. The leaning tower of pizza boxes. A dank, dark game-troll cave where sunlight isn't welcome. Stereotypes? Or does that hit a little too close to home? For the truly effective nerd, cleanliness is next to godliness. Yes, showering is nice, but you also need to keep your rig clean and cool. It doesn't matter what kind of thermal solution you have in that box—fans, no fans, water-filled tubes, gerbils on tiny treadmills—your PC is a dust magnet.

Like a horde of tiny fuzzy aliens, dust invades everything—and it does more than make you sneeze up a storm. It also traps all that heat you spent money on your cooling system to expel; dusty parts get hot and burn out more quickly, and clogged-up fans have to work harder to turn, making them less efficient and more prone to wearing out.

Dust-busting is a relatively painless habit. A few squirts from a can of compressed air (no one is dumb enough to use water, Windex, or a vacuum, right?), and you're good to go. Take a couple of minutes out of your day once a month and your PC will love you for it. And if you're a frequent upgrader, make it a preinstallation ritual.

But why stop at cleaning house within the computer when the hard drive can use the occasional cleanup as well? Defrag your hard drive! Fragmented pieces run amok whenever you (un)install programs, delete files, or run peer-to-peer downloads, making your hard drive work harder to put the file together. So it's a good idea to get all your ducks in a row. Titles such as *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* and *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl* definitely benefit from the occasional defrag. Just go into System Tools and set it to run when you're not around.

5 WATTAGE WATCHERS

Don't be a power hog. A good nerd knows when enough is enough. Time to whip out a spreadsheet, calculator, or anything else that passes for mathematical prowess. Find out exactly how many watts your components need, then get a PSU that matches it. Don't cave in to the "bigger, better, more" theory and buy a beefy PSU just for the bragging rights. The only reason to go overboard on wattage is if you're planning to overclock your rig. It's easier on your wallet and better for the Earth. Who says nerds can't be green?

6 FUTUREPROOFING

A smart nerd knows when to plan ahead. Take motherboards. Fewer new boards come with ample PCI slots. Do you need to plug in your own network interface cards, soundcards, or additional FireWire and USB ports? Many new motherboards skimp on space in order to accommodate a second graphics card—it often becomes an "either/or" situation.

Here's something to consider for those who hate the constant graphics upgrade game: Two older cards in SLI can be better than one new $600 übercard. Let's say you bought one Nvidia GeForce 8800 GTS card right now to get some DX10 games running on your PC. Buy one card and then, months down the road when you really need it, buy a second card at half the price. According to Nvidia spokespeople, that can give you anywhere from a 75 to 100 percent performance boost. >

HIGHLY NERDS

BY DARREN GLADSTONE AND ALICE LIANG

7 BODYROCKING

In office buildings all across this fine land of ours, ergonomic specialists help corporate drones stave off carpal tunnel, eye strain, headaches—all the stuff that comes with spending hours in front of a computer. Add all the time spent playing *World of WarCraft* and you could be in for some serious medical problems down the road. This is hardly the full user manual for the proper care of a human body, but it's a good start.

HAND JIVE

Carpal tunnel is the biggest concern for gamers. Hands locked in a set WASD pattern for hours on end could equal a world of hurt later. Try these two simple stretches:

The Dhalsim: With your fingers extended and palms together, put your elbows out and gently press your hands together. Breathe a Yoga Fireball.

The First-Person Stretcher: Extend your left arm, holding it parallel to the floor, palm down. Take your right hand and place it across your left one. With the four fingers from your right hand on the back of your left hand, and the right thumb pressed against your left thumb's base, gently push the left hand downward. Now switch hands.

BLINDSIDED

A number of things can cause severe eyestrain or headaches when you're playing for prolonged periods. First, turn on the light. You don't need it to be crazy-bright, but your days of sitting in a dark room are over. Also, do you have a high-end, superdope monitor that can hit high resolutions? If so, time to consider increasing the font size. The difference could keep you from upping your eyeglass prescription.

DRAINED

Worn down? You'd be surprised how much good posture plays into your overall health. Sit back in your desk chair for a minute. Is it comfortable? Are you looking directly at your monitor? If you have to lower your eyes or crane your neck to see what's onscreen, knock it off. Prop up something under the monitor if you must. Also, here's a tip brought to you by the letter "L": Think of your posture as a series of straight lines. If you don't have arms on your chair, sit close to your desk to make sure that your arms rest comfortably in an "L" shape when reaching for the keyboard and mouse. Your back should be a straight and both feet touching the ground. If you're not rigid—looking like there's a pole wedged up your posterior—you ain't doing it right. At least you now know why Grammy slapped you for slouching as a kid.

STOP

Now for the most obvious bit of advice: If you're playing anything for more than an hour, take a break. Walk around. Get yourself a drink (water optional). Go to the bathroom. Go see that "sun" you've been hearing so much about on the news. ●

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REVIEW

Game season is upon us. *Crysis*, Valve's *The Orange Box*, *Hellgate: London*—there are so many titles demanding an upgrade that you start considering selling your blood to afford a top-flight game-worthy PC. For those who don't need to hit crazy-high benchmark scores or see the most awesome tree shadows the world has ever known, iBuyPower is banking that its Gamer Mage 550-SLI will work for you. It sells as an all-in-one solution for $999: monitor, speakers, and the tower itself.

No need to repeat system specs here (see "By the Numbers," right), but the one thing that struck us as odd is that this budget gaming rig ships with Vista and only 1GB of RAM. Really? One gig is barely enough to muscle through Vista, let alone play a couple games on it. Guess the optional $90 upgrade to 2GB of RAM isn't so optional after all.

The benchmark scores are not that impressive, to be kind. You're not going to be able to run newer games on the Mage 550 without dialing back on many of the yummy visuals. For consistency in tests, we upped the graphics settings to "badass" and used the bundled monitor's native 1440x900 resolution, and the results killed the Mage 550. Your optimal range with this rig would be 1024x768 resolution, at most. For a rig just under a thousand bucks, it'll do a decent job of playing your old favorites while serving as a good workhorse for everyday tasks.

The sleek black case—with a nice inner foam lining to dampen sound—feels sturdy but doesn't weigh a ton, although the front door is deceptively light. The blue LEDs on the front and side of the door are really bright, so they're hard to ignore if you dislike glowing PCs. But it'll please lovers of illuminated hardware.

Actually a good, effective case. It's just the insides that need a little help.

BY THE NUMBERS

iBUYPOWER GAMER MAGE 550-SLI

URL: **www.ibuypower.com**
CASE: **Nzxt Hush Gaming Tower Case**
CPU: **Athlon 64 X2 5600+ Dual-Core**
COOLER: **Thermaltake MaxOrb CL-P0369**
RAM: **1GB Corsair PC6400 Dual-DDR2 800MHz**
GRAPHICS CARDS: **Dual EVGA 8500 GT (256MB RAM each) in SLI**
HARD DRIVE: **500GB Western Digital SATA II WD5000KS**
OPTICAL DRIVES: **LG 16X DVD-ROM; Samsung 18X DVD±RW SH-S182D**
POWER SUPPLY: **Nzxt PF-500**
OS: **Windows Vista Home Premium, 32-bit**
MONITOR: **19" Widescreen ViewSonic Q19WB**
SPEAKERS: **Logitech X-230 2.1 Speakers**
WARRANTY: **Three-year limited warranty (hardware) and lifetime technical support**
PRICE: **$999 ($1,089 with optional 2GB RAM)**

TRAINING WHEELS

For serious gamers, these training wheels may not be what you're looking for; the PC screams "made for school," and if all you're in the market for is an affordable, reliable computer, this is an admirable buy. It comes with a 19-inch widescreen monitor that's not quite as bright as some higher-end screens (but completely serviceable for everyday use) and a decent-performing 2.1 speaker kit from Logitech. As far as bundles go, think of this as an affordable kick-start to a prohibitively expensive habit. Just keep your expectations in check. ● **Alice Liang**

VERDICT

- **Comes loaded with nearly everything you need to get started.**
- **Game performance; playing newer games might be difficult.**

6/10
AVERAGE
Games for Windows

BENCHMARKS

Game	Game Resolution	Frames Per Second
Company of Heroes (DX10)	1440x900	4.8
F.E.A.R.	1440x900	28
Half-Life 2	1440x900	44
Prey	1440x900	19.6
Supreme Commander	1440x900	10

WINDOWS EXPERIENCE INDEX SCORE: 4.8

NOTE: All tests run at 16xAF, 4xFSAA. All benchmarks run at the included monitor's native resolution, with the 2GB upgrade and maxed visual settings on the individual games. You can probably get higher frames by lowering them to optimal levels for this machine.

RAT RACE

Three new mice roll up to race, but are any worth the money?

REVIEW

Don't envy the mousemaker. Every few years, a peripheral manufacturer feels the need to justify its existence by reinventing a computing staple. Some goofy new twist, a couple novel features, and—voilà!—another $70-plus controller to shill. Now multiply that by countless hardware manufacturers catering to everyone from pro gamers to lefties. How are you supposed to figure out which contraption is right for you? You can go to a store's mouse section and see how each feels in your grip—but we'll take a look at three mouse options here and hopefully save your hand some trouble.

To make things interesting, I'm putting my own mouse—the Logitech G5—up against them. For some, the G5 represents gaming's pinnacle: It has good rubberized sides, a sturdy feel, on-the-fly DPI (dots-per-inch) shifting, and a weighty feel. Even after a couple years, this remains my go-to choice. Three other contenders, each selling for at least 80 bucks and promising improved game, approach the gate. The winner gets to trot down victory lane for my everyday use. The losers are doomed to be forgotten, banished to some unused drawer.

LOGITECH G9

The G9 has a leg up if only because of its lineage. Lying relatively flat, a supple rubber coating surrounds the outside. If you're not crazy about how it conforms to your palm, the G9 has two handgrips. Pop on the one you prefer, and lock it into place. (Option two is slightly raised and not nearly as silky to the touch as the first.) While that variety is nice, the SetPoint software is even nicer. Awesome macro-building tools allow you to use "standard" game macros or map complex commands with ease. Otherwise, this 3200 DPI wonder works as advertised. The two wide mouse buttons work wonders, and the mouse wheel toggles between ratcheting and smoothly spinning. The G9 handles like a luxury car for the most part. It just falls back a little because of the awkwardly placed in-line thumb buttons (again, that boils down to personal preference) and the premium price.

MICROSOFT SIDEWINDER

Among the old-school gamer set, the SideWinder name commands respect. Pulling that line out of retirement reeks of a desperation play. It isn't.

At first glance, the new SideWinder looks like the by-product of a failed 1979 toy line (does anyone remember Rom the Spaceknight?). However, what the SideWinder lacks in chic it more than makes up for in geek. Like the G9, this mouse's strength comes from the software: choose three DPI settings you want assigned to the mouse's topside buttons (it tops out at 2000 DPI), or easily create macros to pull off a quick in-game 180-degree turn.

Hardwarewise, it's no slouch. The average hand drapes over the slightly raised SideWinder, leading fingers to two top buttons and a substantial ratcheting mouse wheel. Some might appreciate that the mouse accessory case doubles as a cable anchor, keeping mouse cords out of the way; others will dig the LCD readout that shows DPI settings. But by far the best feature is something you'd rarely consider: the thumb button layout. It may sound like a minor thing, but it's not until you play that you realize how much a good layout can help. Most mice orient the two thumb buttons in a line—one under the tip, one under the joint. That's supposed to be comfortable? Here, you get two separate nubs aligned with the tip of your thumb, one button below the other. Smartly designed, effective, and fully loaded, the SideWinder is ready to race.

SANDIO 3D02 GAME O2

This particular review got put off until last because, to be completely honest, the Game O2 is a little intimidating. A 2000 DPI mouse sprouting three thumbsticks, five buttons, and a mouse wheel? The O2 enters this race like it's some highly tuned gawky nerdmobile—and when you first use it, that's pretty much how it feels. A little on the plasticky side, it's a case of function over form. Each hat switch provides five input commands—so this could very well be the ultimate RTS tool. It could also serve well for *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars* flyboys who don't want to reach for a flight stick. In short, if anyone needs this many shortcuts on one hand, I won't play against you. Ever.

STUFFED WITH FEATURES, MICROSOFT'S SIDEWINDER COMES CLOSE TO WINNING.

Each hat switch can also be an axis, so one-handed *Half-Life 2* is theoretically possible. But is it practical? That's another matter. After a couple hours of playtime, it gets easier—but using this mouse means adjusting to a tricky learning curve. Casual gamers need not apply.

THE WINNER

Logitech's G5 is a classic, and it still holds its own. Out of this batch of newcomers, the G9 is great, and Microsoft's SideWinder comes *close*—but sorry, fellas. The G5 stays. It may lack the small army of features, but it just feels right and costs a lot less than the $100 G9. If MS works on its plastics and makes a more comfortable SideWinder, Logitech will have something to worry about.

Darren Gladstone

PRODUCT: **G9** MANUFACTURER: **Logitech** PRICE: **$100** URL: **www.logitech.com**

VERDICT

- **Adjustable grips and switchable mouse wheel let you customize the lush feel.**
- **Luxury comes at a price; Still not as comfortable as the classic G5.**

8\10

GOOD

Games for Windows

PRODUCT: **SideWinder** MANUFACTURER: **Microsoft** PRICE: **$80** URL: **www.microsoft.com**

VERDICT

- **Solidly constructed and well-designed; we especially like the thumb buttons.**
- **Cosmetically, it still needs a makeover. It screams "Neeerd!"**

7\10

GOOD

Games for Windows

PRODUCT: **Game O2** MANUFACTURER: **Sandio** PRICE: **$60** URL: **www.sundletech.com**

VERDICT

- **RTS-friendly; more buttons than you will ever see on a mouse.**
- **Prepare for a tough learning curve.**

6\10

AVERAGE

Games for Windows

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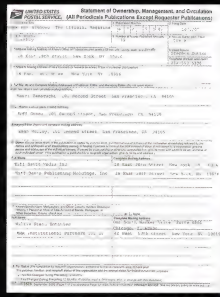
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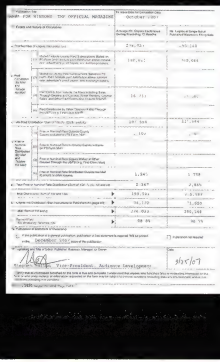
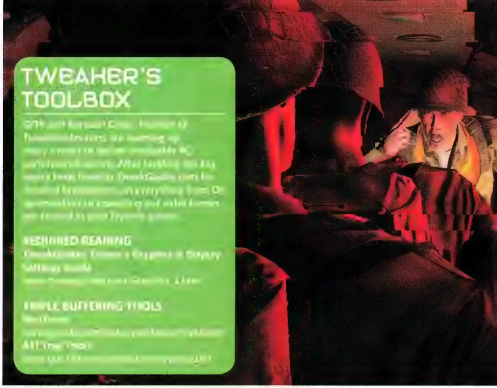




TWEAKER'S TOOLBOX

REQUIRED READING

TRIPLE BUFFERING TOOLS

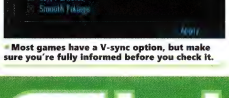
Koroush Ghazi

Koroush Ghazi is the founder of TweakGuides.com.

Improve framerates without sacrificing image quality—it's the PC gamer's dream. Vertical synchronization, or V-sync, is a commonly misunderstood setting that can do exactly that.

UNDERSTANDING V-SYNC

Just as a movie works, the animated game graphics you see onscreen consist of lots of still images called frames shown in rapid succession. A graphics card draws new frames every second and sends them to your monitor, which constantly updates itself so that everything flows smoothly. V-sync has a major impact on this process.



Most games have a V-sync option, but make sure you're fully informed before you check it.

Most games have a V-sync option, and you can also force V-sync on or off in your graphics card's control panel. With V-sync enabled, your monitor and graphics card synchronize their actions every step of the way. The graphics card can only provide as many new frames as the monitor can physically display in any second (the monitor's "refresh rate"), so the first major impact when V-sync is enabled is that your frames per second can never be higher than your monitor's current refresh rate.

However, a much bigger problem occurs when V-sync is enabled: *Your framerate can drop by 50 percent or more.* Ironically, this happens in games that are more demanding—when you need those extra frames per second the most. It has to do with a timing quirk between your graphics card (or GPU) and monitor. When V-sync is on, your graphics card becomes a slave to the monitor. The card can only output a new frame when the monitor says it's ready to display a new frame. This works fine as long as the graphics card always has a new frame ready when the monitor asks for one. But oftentimes in particular periods within demanding games, the graphics card starts to struggle with supplying new frames fast enough and falls out of step with your monitor. In these cases, the monitor simply redisplays the old frame it already has, and the graphics card has to wait a bit longer until the next time the monitor says it is ready for a new frame.

In plain English, the result is that this prevents the GPU from performing to its full potential, and your framerate can be halved due to the extra wait

TECH TU

This month: To V-sync or not to V-sync?

* A dramatic re-enactment of extreme tearing. Look for odd object breaks anywhere and everywhere. If this happens to you, consider using V-sync.

involved. Does this mean you should always turn off V-sync? Well, that's definitely the quickest fix to this problem, but there's a catch: With V-sync disabled, a problem called "tearing" can occur.

TEARING

Turning off V-sync frees your graphics card to pump out frames as fast as possible, regardless of whether the monitor is ready to display them or not. This yields maximum framerates but can also result in a graphical glitch known as tearing. While doing no damage to your monitor, tearing occurs when slightly different partial frames overlap, causing portions of the onscreen image to appear to be out of alignment. It is most noticeable when your field of vision changes rapidly in a game, such as when you quickly turn around.

So the trade-off for having the best possible framerates by turning off V-sync is that you might see some tearing. This isn't a deal-breaker, since tearing is rarely noticeable and the gains in frames are worth it. However, it *is* possible to get the best of both worlds.

TRIPLE BUFFERING

If you want to keep V-sync enabled to prevent tearing but you don't want the potential frames drop that goes with it, there is another solution. Enabling triple buffering creates a third frame buffer in your graphics card's video RAM, giving the card more space to store frames and preventing it from slowing down due to the timing issues we discussed earlier.

If triple buffering is available in your in-game settings, enable it if you also have V-sync on. However, most games don't have a triple buffering setting, so you'll have to turn to the triple buffering option in your graphics card's control panel. Strangely enough, this option only works for OpenGL games, which are increasingly less common these days.

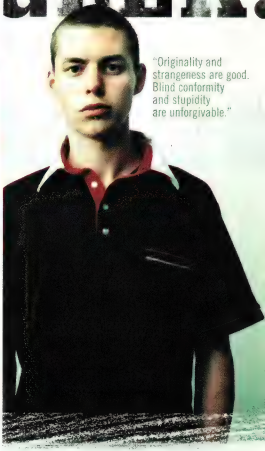
Fortunately, you can use either ATI Tray Tools or RivaTuner (see "Tweaker's Toolbox," pg. 108) to force triple buffering in Direct3D games. In ATI Tray Tools, look for the "Force to use triple buffers" option. Nvidia users: Run RivaTuner's D3DOverrider utility, which you'll find in the Tools directory.

Triple buffering isn't a perfect solution, since it uses additional VRAM. People with graphics cards that have insufficient VRAM and/or who are running their games at very high resolutions and high settings may experience slowdowns. If that sounds familiar, you're better off simply disabling V-sync rather than using triple buffering with V-sync turned on.

As you can see, there's a lot more to V-sync than meets the eye. Still, with a bit of extra effort, you can get a major increase in frames without any decrease in image quality—but this article only scratches the surface of a complex issue. If you're up for it, check out The Gamer's Graphics & Display Settings Guide at TweakGuides.com (see "Tweaker's Toolbox," pg. 108) for a more detailed breakdown of everything discussed here. ■**Koroush Ghazi**

NE-UP

I'M A GEEK.



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TOP 10 GAMES OF 2008

Get ready for another sleepless year!

COLUMN

Jeff Green

Jeff Green appears on over 35 Top 10 lists every year. Congratulate him at jeff_green@ziffdavis.com.

Gamers may be excited for the awesome holiday games, but your trusty *GFW* editors have already found next year's winners, presented here in this world exclusive: the Best Games of 2008!

BROTHERS IN DUTY: CONFLICTS OF WAR: Sure, World War II games are a dime a dozen, but this one promises to be worth more like a dozen dimes, as the concept sketches we looked at prove it. Dallas-based Grunge Software is taking an innovative approach to this incredible first-person shooter by reimagining the 20th century's biggest and bloodiest war as a battle between humans and an alien race named the Zlykqqkyntc. WWII "purists" need not fear the game's lack of "realism," as Grunge is setting many of the levels in real-life WWII battle sites, while many of the Zlykqqkyntc weaponry is based on actual alien technology.

CASIMMO ROYALE: Sony Online is releasing 43 MMORPGs next year—all of them, quite frankly, amazing-looking—but none look better than this James Bond–inspired online game set in the world of spy-vs.-spy global espionage. The developers are experimenting with a streamlined design, eliminating most of the tedium of current-generation MMOs, such as leveling, crafting, combat, PVP, conversation, exploration, quests, puzzles, groups, and guilds. Consider us shaken *and* stirred to join this casiMMO when it opens for business next fall!

AMERICAN MCGEE PRESENTS RICHARD GARRIOTT'S PRODUCTION OF AMERICAN MCGEE'S RICHARD GARRIOTT'S WHAC-A-MOLE: What happens when two legendary game gods get together to make one game? Genius, that's what. *AMPRGPoAMRGWaM* promises to be another genre-bending masterpiece from two of the most celebrated developers of all time. Garriott has said that, unlike most other Whac-a-Mole games—which play, quite frankly, like Whac-a-Mole—his Whac-a-Mole will be totally different, with a much stronger emphasis on moral choice and decision-making. What happens if you *don't* whack the mole? We can't wait to find out.

STEEL MAGNOLIAS: After the global success of *The Godfather*, EA is basing their next big-budget movie-to-game adaptation on this heartwarming 1989 film about life, love, and loss amongst six women in Louisiana, memorably played by Sally Field, Dolly Parton, Shirley MacLaine, Daryl Hannah, Olympia Dukakis, and Julia Roberts. It's hard to know which to be more excited about: That we can finally inhabit the *Steel Magnolias* universe ourselves and talk with the regulars of Truvy's beauty parlor, or that the great Olympia Dukakis herself is doing the voice work for her character, Clairee Belcher. Has a game ever made you cry? This one will.

TOMB RAIDER CLASSIC: Following last year's *Tomb Raider: Anniversary*, a remake of the original game, comes this remake of *Tomb Raider: Anniversary*, which Eidos promises will boast a variety of enhancements such as more detailed character modeling and special new moves for Lara, including a knee bend. "We've captured the essence of what made *Tomb Raider: Anniversary* so special, and with today's technology, we've made a game that will attract an entirely new audience," said a company spokesperson. To which we say: Amen.

W.A.N.K.E.R.: Who is the W.A.N.K.E.R., and what does he want? This is the central mystery behind Moscow-based Piroshky Interactive's rich and graphically amazing stealth-action game. You play as a special agent Ivana Plotz, sent undercover to an office complex to investigate the activities of a person known only as the W.A.N.K.E.R., who seems to possess the supernatural ability to annoy and bother people by his presence alone. As the game begins, the W.A.N.K.E.R. has spoiled the previous night's television episodes for fellow employees and taken the last Diet Coke out of the fridge—again—without asking whose it was, setting in motion a series of events that will play out tragically for all involved.

ILLUSTRATION BY BRIAN TAYLOR

THE HUNDRED YEARS' WAR: Hardcore war gamers, rejoice! This hex-based war game set during the epic 14th-to-15th-century conflict between France and England is the last game you'll ever need—literally!—as boutique developer Chud Games has developed an innovative system that will play out every single day of the war in real time. Even better, those who finish in 2108 will unlock a special bonus mission good for another solid 12 hours of gaming. We can't wait.

BEJOOLED: This unique and innovative puzzle game is unlike anything we've ever seen. Players must match different-colored gems into patterns of three to clear them from the board. Score even more points by making bigger patterns. With so many puzzle games these days so obviously and shamefully "borrowing" from earlier games, it's truly refreshing to find one that strikes out on its own. For this alone, *Bejooled* deserves to be called "a gem."

CUDGEL OF XANTHOR: First revealed in our exclusive world premiere in our May 2007 issue, the latest in Copenhagen-based Braak Software's legendary *Xanthor* series of fantasy-strategy games continues to impress with its indescribable gameplay and graphics. Our current odds-on favorite for game of the year is both more complex than *Scythe of Xanthor* yet simultaneously more accessible than last year's regrettable *Tongs of Xanthor*.

EXCEL: GAME-OF-THE-YEAR EDITION: Hot on the heels of *Halo 2 for Vista* and *Zoo Tycoon: Monkeys Monkeys Monkeys!!*, Microsoft continues to prove that Games for Windows is the best gaming platform of all time with this enhanced version of their bestselling Excel spreadsheet program. While some are unjustly accusing MS of categorizing this as a "game" to artificially inflate the Games for Windows library, all we know is that with five new font colors and more than twice as many formulas, we'll be crunching numbers faster than those *Halo 3* fatsos can crunch their Cheetos!

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